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Norman Cutler

THE DEVOTEE'S
EXPERIENCE OF THE
SACRED TAMIL HYMNS

The poems of the Tamil saints are expressions of bhakti, a personal, devotional approach to the worship of god. Hindu devotionalism took root in the various regions of India at different points in time, and the key figures in what has been called the “bhakti movement” are the saint-poets who manifested the devotional ideal in their own lives and who often became leading figures in religious sects, either in life or in legend. The Tamil saints, who lived between the sixth and the ninth centuries A.D., were the first exemplars of this ideal. While some of them were devotees of Viṣṇu, and some were devotees of the other great god of medieval Hinduism, Śiva, many motifs are common to the entire Tamil devotional corpus.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries the poems of the Tamil saints were already being canonized and incorporated into Tamil Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva religious establishments. The saints were recognized as sacred persons, in Vaiṣṇavism the poems became a vehicle for systematic religious philosophy in the form of commentaries, and in both sectarian traditions the saints and their poems were incorporated into the ritual of the temple. Because the Tamil bhakti poems were canonized, one can speak of a precisely defined Tamil bhakti corpus. In Vaiṣṇava tradition this corpus is embodied in the *Nālāyirattiviyaṭirapantam*, the “heavenly arrangement of four thousand [hymns],” a compilation of the Vaiṣṇava saints’ poems ascribed to the tenth-century religious leader Nāthamuni. The Tamil Śaiva canon is composed of

twelve compendia called *Tirumuṟai* (sacred arrangement). Most of these are single, long poetic texts or anthologies of poems by a single author, but two are compilations of poems by a number of different authors. Nampī Āṇṭār Nampī, who lived during the eleventh century, is credited with arranging all but the last book of the canon.

Bhakti has been described as a religion of contact, of close personal communion between devotee and god and among the members of a community of devotees.¹ The saints constantly strove for union with their lord, they delighted in the company of other devotees, and during times of emotional isolation they suffered greatly. One encounters such themes in their poems time and time again. The following verses will serve as examples:²

I won't bother with Purantaraṇ, Māl or Āyaṇ,
even if my house caves in
I won't care for anyone
but your own servants,
and if I sink into hell
I won't complain—

Lord, our noble leader,
by your grace
I won't give a thought to any god
but you.

[Māṇikkavācakar, *Tiruccatakam* 2]

¹ See A. K. Ramanujan, trans., *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu by Nammālvār* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 146–50.

² Translations of poems composed by four of the Tamil saints, two Śaiva and two Vaiṣṇava, appear in this article. Māṇikkavācakar and Nammālvār are among the most highly revered exemplars of bhakti in Tamil Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, respectively. Their poems are also numbered among the best in the Tamil canon. The dates of both saints are controversial. Those who favor an early dating would assign both saints to the seventh century A.D. Most scholars nowadays, however, believe that Māṇikkavācakar lived during the ninth century and that Nammālvār was roughly his contemporary. The other two saints, Kāraikkālammaiṟ (Śaivite), a woman, and Poykaiyālvār (Vaiṣṇavite), are two of the earliest of the Tamil saints. Both are thought to have lived during the fifth or sixth century A.D. All of the poems cited here and the texts to which they belong are included in the Tamil canon. Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoli* is one of the most important segments of the Vaiṣṇava *Nālāyirattiviyaṭirapantam*, and Māṇikkavācakar's *Tiruvācakam*, of which *Tiruccatakam* is a subsection, occupies a similarly prominent position in the Śaiva *Tirumuṟai*. The other two texts, *Aṟputattiruvāṇiāṭi* and *Mutaliruvāṇiāṭi*, are of historical interest, but they cannot begin to rival the first two in popularity or in the degree of importance accorded them by sectarian scholars. Interestingly, these two early bhakti texts are both examples of a genre called *āṇiāṭi* and are among the earliest poems of this genre.

I don't relinquish my heart at your feet,
 I don't melt with love,
 sing your praise or bring garlands,
 I don't tell of your glory,
 tend your temple or dance—

King among gods,
 refuge for worthy people,

I rush toward my death.

[Māṇikkavācakar, *Tiruccatakam* 14]

O breath
 that gives life to my flesh,
 what a treasure you are!

Because you are here within me
 Madhu's slayer, my Father,
 leader of gods in heaven,
 and I
 have mingled our beings

just as honey, milk, ghī,
 sugar syrup and nectar
 flow in a single stream.

[Nammālvār, *Tiruvāymoḷi* 2.3.1]

The saints, of course, speak a great deal about contact with god, or the consequences of being deprived of such contact, in their poems. Further, this important aspect of bhakti comes into play not only in the content of the saints' poems but also in their rhetorical form, in interpretive accounts of their significance, and in performance. From each of these perspectives the saints' poems can be viewed as a medium of contact. Bhakti poetry is not unique in this respect. Every work of literature, indeed every communicative verbal event, mediates contact between a sender and a receiver—in literary terms, between an author and an audience. The goal of this study is to recover a model of audience that is true to the spirit of the Tamil bhakti poems and to the typical ways in which Tamil Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites have responded to these poems and employed them in worship.

THE AUDIENCE IN THE POEM

Both the content and the structure of a large portion of the Tamil bhakti corpus can be described in terms of a triangle linking the poet, the deity (Viṣṇu or Śiva), and an audience of devotees (or potential devotees), though any single poem will tend to highlight a particular

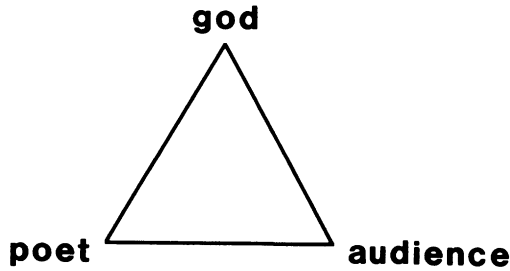


FIG. 1

side or corner of the triangle (see fig. 1). For instance, in a single poem, the poet may address the deity or an audience of devotees and speak about his (or her—a few, but only a few, of the saints were women) own relationship with the god or about the god's relationship with other devotees. A poet may also dwell on characteristic qualities of the god or on his own state of mind. In terms of author-audience relationships, these poems are a verbal medium of contact between the poet and the god and between the poet and other devotees. The following poems will serve as examples:

When I was born and learned to speak
 I was overcome with love
 and I reached your red feet,
 lord of gods, lord with splendid black throat,
 will my sorrows never end?

[Kāraikkālammaiār, *Arputattiruvantāti* 1]

Like an actor in a play
 I imitate your servants
 and clamor to enter the inner chamber of your house,

Master,
 lord brilliant as a mountain of gems set in gold,
 give your grace
 so I can love you with love so constant
 my heart overflows.

[Māṇikkavācakar, *Tiruccatakam* 11]

As long as there's life in this fleeting body
 worship Tirumāl with garlands of perfect blossoms,
 with sacrifice, sacred rites and chants,
 and if you sing his names in praise,
 that's best of all.

[Poykaiyālvār, *Mutaltiruvantāti* 70]

Drop everything,
then release your life-breath
to the lord, master of Release.

[Nammālvār, *Tiruvāymoḷi* 1.2.1]

Yet another kind of relationship involving poet, god, and an audience of devotees is established in the “metapoems” called *phalaśrutis*, which are found among the saints’ poems. Often the verses that constitute a bhakti text are arranged in sets of ten, unified by a common theme and/or formal design. These verse sets, generically called *patikams*, are frequently followed by a *phalaśruti* (the verse that includes “the hearing of the result”). The *phalaśruti* functions as a signature verse for the poet and also extols the benefits a devotee may attain by hearing or reciting the preceding verses. *Phalaśrutis* represent a rhetorical register different from that of the other verses of a *patikam*—their subject is the text itself. In these verses the poet stands back from his own speaking voice and refers to himself by name, in the third person, and usually includes a reference to his “native place.” In this way the Tamil saint creates his own persona and “historicizes” it, as the following verses illustrate:

Śaṭakopa of Kurukūr,
fertile town filled with gardens,
has performed small service
by singing these thousand polished verses
for the lord who churned the ocean capped with waves,
the lord the gods worship
so they may rise to high places—

people who master these ten verses of the thousand
will rise with the gods
and escape the prison of births.

[Nammālvār, *Tiruvāymoḷi* 1.3.1]

Śaṭakopa of Kurukūr
has artfully sung these thousand verses
in praise of the beautiful Player
who rules the seven worlds—

people who faithfully sing
these ten verses of the thousand
will never be in need.

[Nammālvār, *Tiruvāymoḷi* 2.2.11]

Phalaśrutis, considered in relation to the “primary level” poems they follow, add another very important dimension to the poet-audience

relationship we find played out in the text of the saints' poems. *Phalaśrutis* always address an audience of devotees and relate that audience directly to the preceding text. Much of that text concerns and even documents the poet's personal experience and relationship with the god. By encouraging his audience to recite these verses and thereby attain highly valued goals, such as release from karmic limitations, the poet sets himself up as a model for other devotees. In effect he invites other devotees to relive his own experience.³ In this way *phalaśrutis* prepare a relationship between the audience and the deity, following the example of the poet's relationship with the god. The shift of rhetorical register represented by the *phalaśruti* places and historicizes not only the narrative voice of the poet but the audience as well. In these verses, the poet provides a format for a present, historical audience to enter into the world of the text—to experience directly what the poet has experienced.

THE AUDIENCE OF BHAKTI POETRY—A ŚRĪVAIṢṆAVA MODEL

If the period of Tamil cultural history extending from the sixth to the ninth century can be described as the age of the saints, then perhaps the succeeding four or five centuries may be described as the age of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva *ācāryas* (teachers). During this period the hymns of the saints were brought together to form the canonical anthologies of Tamil Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, and both branches of Hinduism evolved highly organized sectarian institutions that have survived to the present day.

The predominant Vaiṣṇava doctrinal tradition in Tamilnadu is known by the name Śrīvaiṣṇavism, and its most influential exponent was the philosopher Rāmānuja, who, according to tradition, lived from A.D. 1017 to 1137. Rāmānuja was instrumental in introducing recitation of the saints' hymns into the ritual routine of the temple of Raṅkanāṭaṅ (a manifestation of Viṣṇu) at Śrīraṅgam, which in turn became a model for most Vaiṣṇava temples in Tamilnadu. Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition recognizes a direct line of spiritual authority (*guruparam-parā*) that links the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* with the earlier saints, or *ālvārs*, as they are known in this tradition. In fact, Rāmānuja is placed fourth in line of succession after Nāthamuni, the recognized compiler of the *ālvārs*' hymns.

In a recent article, Friedhelm Hardy surveys a large body of Śrīvaiṣṇava (as well as more popular) literature dealing with Nammālvār, one

³ See Indira V. Peterson, "Singing of a Place: Pilgrimage as Metaphor and Motif in the Tēvāram Songs of the Tamil Śaivite Saints," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120 (1982): 69–90, esp. 81.

of the twelve Tamil Vaiṣṇava saints.⁴ Hardy's purpose is to explore the Śrīvaiṣṇava interpretation of Nammālvār, the most highly revered and theologically most significant ālvār, and to show how, for Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Nammālvār became a symbol that they invoked to formulate and maintain their sectarian identity.⁵ While Hardy's findings are certainly interesting in their own terms, for now let us see how his efforts to digest Śrīvaiṣṇava writings on Nammālvār can bring us closer to the Śrīvaiṣṇava understanding of Nammālvār's audience. We can then evaluate the relationship between the audience we find in the saints' poems and an interpretive formulation of the poems' audience current in a tradition that has accorded these poems the status of sacred scripture.

Two important genres of Śrīvaiṣṇava literature are hagiographies of the saints and commentaries on their poems. Both contain important clues to the conception of audience we are pursuing. In fact, Nañjīyar, a twelfth- (or thirteenth-) century commentator on Nammālvār's magnum opus, *Tiruvāymoḷi*, provides us with just the kind of statement we are looking for. He asserts that the audience (*bhokṭṛ*, literally "enjoyer") of Nammālvār's hymns includes "all those who wish to be liberated, are already liberated, and have eternally been liberated, and Viṣṇu himself, the husband of Śrī."⁶ Let us explore further and see what themes in Śrīvaiṣṇava thought and practice underlie Nañjīyar's statement.

According to Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographic accounts, Nammālvār, an incarnation of the divine general Viṣvaksena (in some accounts, of Viṣṇu himself), was born the son of a Veḷḷāḷa (non-Brahmin) chieftain who lived in the village of Kurukūr (present-day Ālvārtirunakari) located in southern Tamilnadu.⁷ Nammālvār is said to have been filled

⁴ Friedhelm Hardy, "The Tamil Veda of a Śūdra Saint (The Śrīvaiṣṇava Interpretation of Nammālvār)," in *Contributions to South Asian Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Gopal Krishna (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979). The number of ālvārs is sometimes said to be twelve, and sometimes ten. Two of the saints, Āṇṭāl and Maturakavi, are considered to be "special cases" and are therefore not always included with the others. Maturakavi is known for one hymn he composed in adoration of his guru, Nammālvār. Unlike the other ālvārs he did not praise Viṣṇu directly. Āṇṭāl is considered to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu's consort Bhūdevi and therefore occupies a special place in the tradition.

⁵ Indira V. Peterson has formulated a similar argument in the Tamil Śaiva context, specifically with reference to the Tēvāram hymns and their authors, Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar (see "The Role of the Songs of the Tamil Śaivite Saints in the Formation and Preservation of Tamil Śaivite Sectarian Identity" [paper presented at the South Asia Regional Studies Seminar, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, March 5, 1981]).

⁶ Hardy, p. 48.

⁷ There are several Śrīvaiṣṇava texts that give a history of the *paramparā* (preceptor lineage) of the sect. Among the most often cited are the *Kuruparamparai pirapāvam* "6000" by Piṇṇaḷakiya Perumāḷ Jīyar (in Tamil) and the *Divyāsūricarita* by Garuḍāvāhana Paṇḍita (in Sanskrit). Scholars disagree on the dating of these texts. Hardy

with perfect consciousness of Viṣṇu from the moment of his birth, and for this reason, he experienced none of the physical or social needs of ordinary children. He showed no inclination to suckle his mother's milk; he never cried; he never even opened his eyes. The saint's parents were understandably bewildered by this extraordinary behavior, and twelve days after his birth they took the child to the Viṣṇu temple of Kurukūr and left him there. The saint settled himself at the foot of a tamarind tree growing inside the temple compound (the tree is said to be an incarnation of the snake Ananta), and there, for sixteen years, he sat in meditation, completely absorbed in contemplation of Viṣṇu.

The *Divyasūricarita*, one of the standard Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographic texts, continues the story as follows: "When sixteen years had come to an end, his overwhelming happiness burst forth from within him like water from a full lake [appearing] in the form of his poems. When he had composed various songs which were lovely by virtue of Bhagavān's qualities [they described], he immersed himself in the ocean of His bliss, swooned and then recovered."⁸ This passage appears to support the commonplace notion that the saints' hymns represent a "spontaneous outpouring" of their feelings of devotion for the lord. There is very little overt sense of an intended audience for the hymns implied by this notion, unless it be that the saints directed their hymns to the lord, the object of their devotion.⁹

But the tale is not yet finished. A critical actor in Nammālvār's story, the saint Maturakavi, now enters the narrative. Maturakavi, we are told, was a Brahmin who hailed from Kōlūr, a village near Kurukūr. Maturakavi embarked on an extensive pilgrimage to Viṣṇu shrines in many parts of India, and one day, during his meanderings in the north, he saw a bright light in the southern sky. He followed this light to its source, the saint Nammālvār—his destined guru. When Maturakavi posed Nammālvār a question, the saint, who had hitherto been oblivious to everyone and everything other than Viṣṇu, graciously

suggests a date of composition in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century for the Sanskrit work (p. 35).

⁸ Hardy, p. 36.

⁹ Kamil Zvelebil discusses the hymns of the Tamil Śaiva saints in terms of a typological schema for devotional poetry devised by A. M. Pyatigorsky. Poems are analyzed in terms of four categories: S₁, the interior state of the subject (devotee); S₂, the external actions of the subject; O₁, the respective reaction of the object (god) in relation to the subject; and O₂, the state, qualities, or actions of the object of the cult irrespective of the given relation to the subject (Kamil Veith Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan on Tamil Literature of South India* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973], pp. 199–206). This scheme provides a much more detailed account of the inner dynamics of a devotional poem than does the spontaneous outpouring notion, but it still leaves the audience dimension largely unexplored.

interrupted his reverie to instruct his worthy disciple.¹⁰ Maturakavi, we are told, set the *ālvār*'s poems to music and sang before audiences of devotees. In one version of the story he is also credited with instituting regular worship of Nammālvār's image.

With the introduction of Maturakavi a more explicit notion of audience begins to come into focus. The hagiographic accounts do not claim that Nammālvār had Maturakavi in mind as the audience for his poems when he composed them. In fact, in *Tiruvāymoḷi* the *ālvār* proclaims that Viṣṇu is the real author of the poems and that he, Nammālvār, is merely the god's mouthpiece.¹¹ But the accounts do strongly imply that, once these works (known as the Tamil Veda in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition)¹² were manifest in the world, they became the content of Maturakavi's spiritual education. Furthermore, the hagiographers suggest that the *ālvār*'s poems did not find an audience sheerly by accident but rather that a divine purpose directed their composition and propagation. In the words of the *Divyasūricarita*, "That Parāṅkūśa [i.e., Nammālvār]¹³ began to relate to Madhurakavi, who was eager to hear, the greatness of the Tamil Veda. 'In order to protect all beings, He who is born of Himself (svabhūḥ) made through my mouth these Tamil stanzas [filled] with the meaning of the Vedas.'"¹⁴

The idea that the composition of sacred poems by saint-poets is part of a divine stratagem to direct humanity along a salvific path is elaborated in the hagiographies. The gist of these accounts is that Viṣṇu, not

¹⁰ As others have pointed out, the legendary relationship between Nammālvār and Maturakavi functions as an ideal model for one of the cornerstones of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology, the relationship between preceptor and disciple.

¹¹ *Tiruvāymoḷi* 7.9.2, 7.9.5.

¹² The Sanskrit hymns of the four Vedas are recognized as sacred scripture by all orthodox Hindus. They are referred to as *śruti* (that which is heard) because, according to belief, the Vedic poets did not so much compose these hymns as receive and transmit them from an eternal source. Traditionally, only men of "twice-born" castes are permitted to hear the Vedic hymns. As the Tamil Veda, *Tiruvāymoḷi* is also divine in origin, but unlike its Sanskrit counterpart, it is accessible to everyone, not least because it is in the vernacular. Śrīvaiṣṇava theologians make much of this point.

¹³ Śrīvaiṣṇavism knows Nammālvār by several names. Among these are *Māraṇ*, *Catakōpaṇ*, and *Parāṅkucaṇ*. The name *Māraṇ* was used as a title by the Pāṇṭiya kings. Popular accounts relate that the *ālvār*'s parents gave their son this name because he was different (from *māru*, "to be altered") from other children, but this probably is a folk etymology. The *ālvār* is said to have acquired the name *Caṭakōpaṇ* because he drove away the vapor (*caṭam*; Sanskrit: *śaṭha*) that normally obscures a newborn child's innate mental clarity with his anger (*kōpa*). This explanation of the name, however, also sounds suspiciously like a folk etymology, and it may simply mean "one whose anger is directed against deceit" (*śaṭha*). The name *Parāṅkucaṇ* (Sanskrit: *Parāṅkuśa*), which literally means "one whose goad (*aṅkuśa*) is held by another," expresses the *ālvār*'s complete dependence on Viṣṇu. Finally, it is said that Viṣṇu himself called the saint by the name Nammālvār (our *ālvār*) as a mark of his great fondness for this extraordinary devotee.

¹⁴ Hardy, p. 37.

succeeding in his various efforts to promote the salvation of humankind through such devices as taking *avatāras* on earth, decided that a foolproof means was called for. He therefore decided that he would assume the form of *arcā* (temple icon) and that his various emblems and various members of his heavenly retinue would be born on earth as saints, known in theological terms as *aṃśāvatāras*. One account suggests that the *ālvārs* were more likely to succeed where Viṣṇu, in his earlier efforts, had failed because they were “of the same class as men” and thus they would act as decoys to lure humans toward a salvific path.¹⁵

The correlation of the *ālvārs* with the *arcā* concurs with a scheme found elsewhere in Śrīvaiṣṇava literature whereby each of Viṣṇu’s five manifestations (of which the *arcā* is the fifth) is correlated with an authoritative genre of scripture (*pramāṇa*). In this scheme *Tiruvāymoli*, as a metonym for the entire corpus of sacred Tamil poems, is correlated with the *arcā*.¹⁶ The essential quality shared by the Tamil poems and the temple image, in contradistinction to other forms of scripture and Viṣṇu’s other manifestations, is maximum accessibility.

What all this seems to boil down to, in terms of the present discussion, is a composite notion of audience that is part and parcel of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology. Nammālvār was born on earth in fulfillment of Viṣṇu’s plan to bring salvation within reach of humankind. The saint was graced with a complete revelation of Viṣṇu, and this overwhelming experience “burst out” of him in the form of poetry. In accord with the divine plan, Maturakavi was drawn to Nammālvār and became his disciple. If Nammālvār is Viṣṇu’s mouthpiece, Maturakavi is his public relations man, for he is the one who actually arranged for recitation of the hymns before audiences of devotees. Thus Nammālvār and Maturakavi are links in a chain whereby Viṣṇu reveals himself to his devotees (see fig. 2).

The idea of a rhetorical vector that originates in Viṣṇu and is directed toward his devotees is underscored by the term *anubhava-grantha*, used by Śrīvaiṣṇavas to denote the *ācāryas*’ commentaries on *Tiruvāymoli*. According to K. K. A. Venkatachari, the appropriate interpretation of *anubhava* in this context is “enjoyment,” and thus an *anubhava-grantha* is a “work of enjoyment.” In other words, the commentaries capture the *ācāryas*’ enjoyment of Nammālvār’s hymns. Furthermore, *Tiruvāymoli* is said to express Nammālvār’s enjoyment

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 42–46.

¹⁶ The categories of sacred scripture and the aspects of Viṣṇu are correlated as follows: Vedas: para (supreme, transcendent) aspect; Pāñcarātraśāstras: vyūha (emanations); Dharmaśāstras: antaryāmin (in-dweller); Itihāsa (epics): vibhava (Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, etc.); Tiruvāymoli: arcā (iconic image).

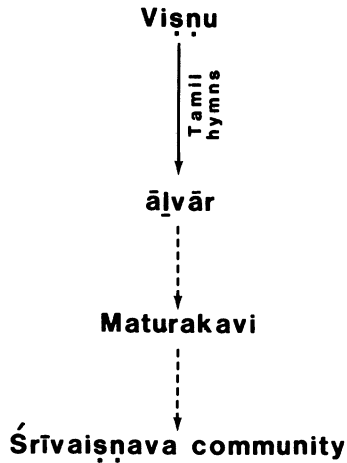


FIG. 2

of Viṣṇu. One commentator tells us that “Nammālvār was enjoying the Lord by the Lord’s grace, and so was considered to be quite full (of everything) (*paripūrṇa*).”¹⁷ Nammālvār’s poems are viewed as the by-product of his intense enjoyment of the lord’s qualities. Venkatachari’s summary of the “chain of enjoyment” that is implicit in the term *anubhavantha* is very much to the point:

Śrīvaiṣṇavism can be called a tradition of spiritual enjoyment. The basis of the tradition is the *ālvār*s’ enjoyment (*anubhava*) of the Lord. Secondly, there is the commentators’ enjoyment (*anubhava*) of the hymns of the *ālvār*s. Because the commentators do not consider their task of commenting a pedantic work, but rather the very embodiment of their own enjoyment, their commentaries in turn become a literature to be enjoyed by the subsequent generations. In the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition direct enjoyment of the Lord can also be indirect enjoyment of Him through the hymns of the *ālvār*s and also the commentaries, which are testimonies of the spiritual experience of the community.¹⁸

So far my reconstruction of an audience model in line with Śrīvaiṣṇava conceptions involves a flow from Viṣṇu to his devotee, with the *ālvār* playing an intermediary role—or otherwise expressed, with the

¹⁷ K. K. A. Venkatachari, *The Maṇipravāḷa Literature of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas* (Bombay: Anantacharya Research Institute, 1978), p. 93. The hymns of the Tamil Vaiṣṇava saints have been the subject of numerous theological commentaries. Documentation of a Tamil Vaiṣṇava commentatorial tradition begins in the twelfth century with Tirukkuruḷaippirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ’s commentary on Nammālvār’s *Tiruvāymoli*, “the six thousand.” The commentator in this case is Vatakkuttiruvṛtippillai.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

ālvār taking the position of first link in a chain of devotees. The model, as it now stands, encompasses all the audience categories enumerated by Nañjīyar in the statement cited above, with the crucial exception of the last, Viṣṇu himself. (Nañjīyar's other categories—all those who wish to be liberated, etc.—are contained in the idea of devotee in its broadest application.) What do we do with the last member of Nañjīyar's list?

By further probing Śrīvaiṣṇava belief and practice we come to realize that the audience model implicit in this system of religious thought includes a second dimension that we have not yet accounted for. Here we find a movement in the reverse direction, from devotee to god, again with the *ālvār* functioning as the first link in a chain. The idea of enjoyment, which Venkatachari has shown to be central to Śrīvaiṣṇava spiritual experience, is also an important component on this side of the equation. Not only does the *ālvār* enjoy the qualities of the lord and ultimately pass on his enjoyment to the Śrīvaiṣṇava community at large, but Viṣṇu is also said to enjoy hearing the *ālvārs'* hymns recited. This, in fact, is an important rationale for recitation of the *ālvārs'* hymns in Tamil Vaiṣṇava temples. What is the evidence?

A starting point for this interpretation is provided in the hagiographies that describe the redaction of the *ālvārs'* hymns by Nāthamuni. According to the traditional account, Nāthamuni (whose grandson, Yāmuna, became the preceptor of Rāmānuja) went into a trance after reciting Maturakavi's poem in praise of Nammālvār 12,000 times. While he was in this state, Nammālvār appeared to him and taught him the hymns of the *ālvārs* as well as some of the pivotal doctrines of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. In Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition Nāthamuni is credited with reviving the practice of reciting the *ālvārs'* hymns at the temple of Raṅkanāṭaṇ at Śrīraṅkam. In so doing he is said to have been following an example set by Tirumaṅkaiyālvār, another of the Tamil Vaiṣṇava saints.¹⁹ He is also credited with teaching the proper mode of recitation to his sister's sons, who in turn passed on the tradition of ritual recitation to future generations of Śrīvaiṣṇavas.

Nāthamuni fits into Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographic literature as the crucial link between the *ālvārs* and the later *ācāryas*, and in this capacity he is a major actor in the official chronicle of the Śrīraṅkam temple.

¹⁹ The dating of the *ālvārs* is controversial. The Śrīvaiṣṇava *paramparā* places Nammālvār fifth among the *ālvārs* and Tirumaṅkai last. However, by and large, modern historians assign Tirumaṅkai to the eighth century and Nammālvār to the ninth century (see, e.g., K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar* [Madras: Oxford University Press, 1966], pp. 426–27). Hardy, however, postulates the seventh century as the time when Nammālvār lived (pp. 41–42).

This chronicle, called *Kōyil Oluku*, relates how the *ālvārs*' hymns became a part of temple ritual, and in this version of the story Viṣṇu is explicitly portrayed in the role of audience.

The *Oluku* tells us that Tirumaṅkai settled down at Śrīraṅkam and composed hymns for Viṣṇu, or Perumāḷ, as the god is known there. In addition, we are told that at this time Maturakavi installed the image of his master, Nammālvār, in the temple of Kurukūr and instituted special ritual performance in honor of the *ālvār*. Apparently Maturakavi also was in the habit of visiting Śrīraṅkam.

Once Tirumaṅkai sang some of his compositions for Perumāḷ during the festival celebrated in the month of Karttikai (November-December), and he acted out the import of the hymns with gestures (*abhinaya*) as he sang. Perumāḷ was very pleased with Tirumaṅkai's performance, and he asked the saint how he would like to be honored for his service. The saint requested that Perumāḷ listen to *Tiruvāymoḷi* on the *ekādaśi* day of the bright half of Mārkaḷi (the month that follows Karttikai) and that he honor *Tiruvāymoḷi* with all the honors due to the Vedas. Perumāḷ agreed and arrangements were made for the festival called Adhyayanotsava, when *Tiruvāymoḷi* would be recited along with the Vedas.

Maturakavi traveled to Śrīraṅkam for the festival with the image of Nammālvār that he had enshrined in the temple at Kurukūr. When they arrived, Perumāḷ bestowed many honors on Nammālvār and gave him the name (which means "our *ālvār*") by which he has been known ever since. During the Adhyayanotsava the Vedas were recited during the daytime, and in the evening Maturakavi, as Nammālvār's representative, recited the verses of *Tiruvāymoḷi* and acted out the poems' meaning with gestures. The recitation was carried on every day for ten days, and after it was concluded Perumāḷ honored Maturakavi with gifts of garlands, *prasāda*, scents, and *tirumaṇ* ("holy earth," the clay used by Śrīvaiṣṇavas to draw the sectarian mark on their foreheads).

The Adhyayanotsava was celebrated annually in this way for many years, but eventually observance of the festival lapsed, and Nammālvār's hymns were forgotten. After Nāthamuni recovered the hymns of the *ālvārs*, he revived the Adhyayanotsava and sang the hymns of *Tiruvāymoḷi* for Perumāḷ as Maturakavi had before him. He also extended the scope of the festival by incorporating recitation of the hymns of all the other *ālvārs* into the ritual schedule. After Nāthamuni's death this tradition was carried on by Kīlaiyakattālvāṇ and Mēlaiyakattālvāṇ, his sisters' sons.

In the continuation of the *Oluku* account we learn that the god bestowed the title *araiyar* (king) on the two reciters and presented them

with all the tokens of honor that he had previously bestowed on Nammālvār.²⁰ From that time on the reciter of the *ālvārs*' hymns at Śrīraṅkam was called *araiyar*, a title that was given to no other temple servant, and the *araiyar* received the turban, vestments, and garlands that had adorned the lord as recognition for the service he performed during the Adhyayanotsava.²¹

The ritual format described in *Kōyil Oluku* is preserved, to varying degrees, in present-day Tamil Vaiṣṇava temples. It presents us with an audience model that, in a sense, is the inverse of the model discussed previously. Here the poems are a vehicle for the devotee to bring enjoyment to the lord. As in the first model, the primary actors are Viṣṇu and the *ālvār* (who in Śrīvaiṣṇava thought is regarded as Viṣṇu's quintessential devotee), only now their roles are reversed. In the lingo of communications theory the *ālvār* is now "sender" and Viṣṇu is "receiver." And, as in the previous model, the *ālvār* is the first member of a series that ultimately fans out to include the Śrīvaiṣṇava community as a whole. In this case a series begins with the *ālvār*, the principal performer of the sacred hymns, and extends to his "substitutes"—Maturakavi, Nāthamuni, Nāthamuni's nephews, the temple servant who holds the office of *araiyar*, and, by association, to the congregation of Śrīvaiṣṇavas who "support" the *araiyar*'s recitation. This second model implies that any devotee who recites *Tiruvāymoḷi* in worship of Viṣṇu not only follows the example set by Nammālvār but actually assumes the persona of Nammālvār (see fig. 3).

By superimposing the two models a picture may be formulated that does justice to the Śrīvaiṣṇava conception of the saints' hymns and their audience. And, we might note, Nañjīyar's description of the proper audience of *Tiruvāymoḷi* has now been accounted for in its

²⁰ The *Oluku* tells us that Perumāḷ bestowed the name "arayar of the exalted Maṇavāḷa Perumāḷ" on one brother and the name "nātavinoda arayar" on the other. The name given to the first seems to indicate his premier rank among the deity's servants. (Maṇavāḷa, which means "bridegroom" or "husband," is a name of Viṣṇu at Śrīraṅkam.) The name given to the second brother, which literally means "king of the pastime of drama (or dance)," underscores the nature of the *araiyar*'s service—to sing and act out the *ālvārs*' hymns for the deity. Perhaps the *araiyar* was given this title to identify him with the king of the realm, who, in medieval Hindu India, was the paramount worshiper of the deity, a role that was of central significance in the Hindu conception of sovereignty. The *araiyar* is the "king" of the Adhyayanotsava because, in the context of this ritual performance, he represents Viṣṇu's premier devotee. For an illuminating discussion of the ritual importance of the Hindu king, see Ronald B. Inden, "Ritual, Authority and Cyclic Time in Hindu Kingship," in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. F. Richard (Madison: University of Wisconsin South Asian Studies Publications, 1978).

²¹ My summary of incidents pertaining to the sacred hymns and their audience found in *Kōyil Oluku* is based on the English translation by V. N. Hari Rao, *Kōil Olugu: The Chronicle of the Srirangam Temple with Historical Notes* (Madras: Rochouse & Sons, 1961).

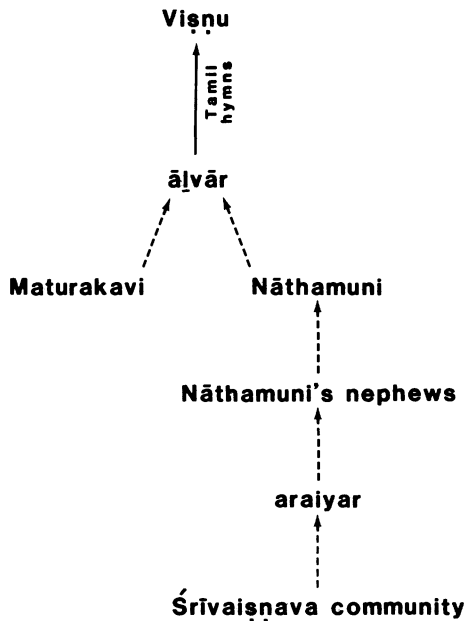


FIG. 3

entirety. In this picture Viṣṇu is the ultimate source of the hymns *and* their end. This conception can also be described as a transaction between Viṣṇu and the *āḷvār* in which the two actors play alternating roles. From one point of view the *āḷvār* represents the Śrīvaiṣṇava community: Viṣṇu's grace is "filtered" to all Śrīvaiṣṇavas through the person of the *āḷvār*. From another, the community represents the *āḷvār*: the *araiyar*, with the congregation of devotees behind him, performs the sacred hymns for Viṣṇu on behalf of the *āḷvār*. The god can be seen as author and the devotee as audience, and, conversely, the devotee can be seen as author and the god as audience. Both are valid ways of looking at the relationship. God and devotee are bound together in a closed circuit that is activated by the Tamil hymns (see fig. 4).

One might object that this model accounts only for Nammāḷvār's relation to Viṣṇu and leaves out the other saints. But this is not really so since in Śrīvaiṣṇava thought it is quite clear that Nammāḷvār stands foremost among the saints—he perfects the role. For instance, the other *āḷvār*s are described as the limbs (*avayava*) of Nammāḷvār. Likewise, in conformity with the idea that Nammāḷvār's poems are equated with the four Vedas, the six works of Tirumāṅkaiyāḷvār are equated with the Vedāṅgas (limbs of the Veda) and the works of the other

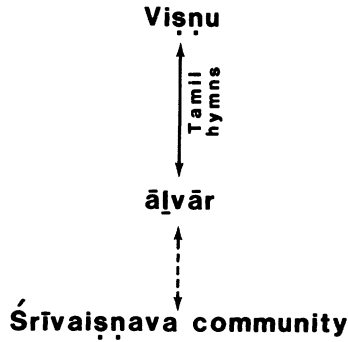


FIG. 4

ālvārs with the *upāṅgas* (supplementary limbs).²² Both of these schemes are organic and suggest that Nammālvār can stand for all the Vaiṣṇava saints and his poems for the entire corpus of sacred hymns. It is not unreasonable to claim that the relationship between Nammālvār and Viṣṇu encapsulates an entire theology and that the sacred hymns are the cement of that relationship. It is here that we find the key to the Tamil Vaiṣṇava's understanding of these poems.

As one would expect, this sectarian model of the saints' poems and their audience selects from and expands on the constructions of audience we found in the poems themselves. This is so because, as Hardy has demonstrated, the sectarian establishment constructed hagiographies and a whole sectarian "history," in part, on the foundation of suggestive passages from the saints' poems.²³ We can see that this pattern pertains not only to the content of the poems but also to their rhetorical form. The poet-god-audience triangle that emerges from the poems themselves is expanded into a circuit in which the same actors are linked in more elaborate ways. Also, the Śrīvaiṣṇava conception complements the rhetorical form of the *phalaśruti* verse and further develops the idea that the Tamil hymns are a medium for all devotees to become saints.

TAMIL ŚAIVA PARALLELS

The degree to which Tamil Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions are seen as similar or dissimilar is largely a matter of emphasis. A motif analysis of

²² The six Vedāṅgas, or subjects of study that complement the study of the Vedas, are *śikṣā* (science of proper pronunciation), *chandas* (meter), *vyākaraṇa* (grammar), *nirukta* (etymology of difficult words), *jyotiṣa* (astronomy), and *kalpa* (ceremonial). The *upāṅgas* include the Purāṇas (mythological texts), the classical schools of philosophy, and the texts on dharma (social and religious norms of behavior).

²³ Hardy, pp. 32, 38.

the saints' poems in both traditions would uncover not only a large area of commonality but also certain themes that receive greater emphasis in one tradition or the other.²⁴ Formally, the poems of both traditions are practically identical, and this applies both to formal properties on a technical level (meter, use of conventions of classical Tamil poetry, arrangements of verses, etc.) and to the rhetorical form of the texts. The poet-god-audience triangle is operative in poems of both traditions; the poets employ similar narrative devices; and both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva poets reflect on their poetry through the device of *phalaśruti* verses.

A close study of hagiography, theology, and the ritual contexts in which the saints' poems are recited in the two sectarian contexts also will reveal large areas of overlap, though here we find fairly large areas of divergence as well. It is not possible to undertake a thorough comparative study of Tamil Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism here. The question that concerns us is simply, To what degree is the audience model implicit in Śrīvaiṣṇava theological discourse and ritual also operative in the Tamil Śaiva context? The answer seems to be that, while one can point to particulars that suggest that a parallel model is operative, Tamil Śaivism does not provide us with a compact and elegant formulation of this model such as we find in the hagiographical account of Nammālvār's life or in the segment from the Śrīraṅgam temple chronicle discussed above.

One reason a well-articulated model emerged so naturally from the Śrīvaiṣṇava literature is that, as a system of religious thought, Śrīvaiṣṇavism is highly focused. Important tenets of belief intermesh to form a tightly knit whole. The hymns of the saints constitute the Vaiṣṇava Tamil canon, hence the concepts of "saint" and "sacred scripture" are coterminous. The saints are related to Viṣṇu by means of the doctrine of *aṃśāvatāra*, and they are related to one another through a model that parallels the Vedic model of the cosmic man—the other *ālvārs* are spoken of as Nammālvār's limbs.²⁵ Finally, the spiritual lineage of authoritative teachers (*ācāryas*) in this tradition is seen as originating in Nammālvār, the foremost saint.

²⁴ A comparative study of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva "companion" pieces, *Tiruppāvai* by Āṇṭāḷ (Vaiṣṇava) and *Tiruvempāvai* by Māṇikkavācaṅkar (Śaiva), e.g., reveals a greater emphasis on mythological allusion in the Vaiṣṇava poem and a greater emphasis on abstract characterizations of the deity in the Śaiva poem (see Norman Cutler, *Consider Our Vow: An English Translation of Tiruppāvai and Tiruvempāvai* [Madurai: Muthu Patippakam, 1979], pp. 3–4).

²⁵ The Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* self-consciously drew many parallels between the orthodox Sanskrit and the Tamil strains in their tradition. This Sanskrit-Tamil parallelism in Śrīvaiṣṇava theology is denoted by the term *ubhayavedānta* (twofold Vedānta).

One finds partially parallel concepts in Tamil Śaivism, but they do not mesh so precisely. Tamil Śaivism recognizes sixty-three saints or *nayanmārs*. Some were poets whose hymns are included in the Tamil Śaiva canon, the twelve *Tirumuṟai*, but some were not. Also, the *Tirumuṟai* include works by poets who are not numbered among the *nayanmār*. One of these, Māṇikkavācakar, is, however, highly revered and is included as one of four *camayācāryas* or “preceptors of the faith.” The other three, Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar, authors of the hymns referred to as *Tēvāram* (*Tirumuṟai* 1–7), are also known as the *mūvar mutalikaḷ* (the first three). The Tamil Śaiva preceptor lineage begins with four *cantānācāryas* (preceptors of the lineage). While, in a sense, parallel to the *camayācāryas*, they are not thought of as direct spiritual descendents of the saint-poets. Finally, Tamil Śaivism provides no direct commentaries on the saints’ hymns, such as one finds in Śrīvaiṣṇavism,²⁶ nor do we find a text quite like *Kōyil Oḷuku*, which discusses the origins of temple ritual, though, as we shall see, the Śaiva temple at Chidambaram plays a role in the Śaiva context similar to that of the Śrīraṅkam temple in the Vaiṣṇava context.

Given this imperfect fit between the two sectarian traditions, certain features of Tamil Śaivism can still be identified that suggest that an audience model, such as is found in Śrīvaiṣṇava discourse and ritual practice, is also present in the Śaiva context, even if its articulation is only partial. Let us now look at some of these features, starting with the first part of the model in which the direction of movement is from deity to devotee.

As we saw in figure 2, in this model the ultimate author of the Tamil hymns is the god, who “speaks” through the saint. We find some evidence that this idea also exists in Tamil Śaivism. Like the *Nāḷayirattiviyapirapantam* in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, the Tamil Śaiva canon is known as the Tamil Veda, and thus the saints’ hymns are equated with the “revealed” sacred literature in Sanskrit. We find another indication in hagiography that at least Campantar’s poems ultimately originate with god. According to the canonical Tamil Śaiva hagiography called *Periya Purāṇam*, composed by Cēkkiḷār (thirteenth century),²⁷ when Campantar was a child of three years, his father took him to the temple of Tōṇiyappar (a form of Śiva) and left him on the steps of the temple tank while he performed his ablutions. The child, thinking himself abandoned by his father, burst into tears, crying out the words “Ammā

²⁶ One now finds editions of some portions of the *Tirumuṟai* with commentaries, but the earliest such commentaries were written only in the late nineteenth century, and they do not have the status of the “classical” commentaries in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition.

²⁷ Not long after its composition, *Periya Purāṇam* was added to the Tamil Śaiva canon to become the twelfth *Tirumuṟai*.

[mother], Appā [father].” Śiva and his consort Umā were touched by the child’s cries and appeared before him. The goddess filled a golden cup with milk from her breast and fed the child Campantar. From the moment Campantar drank the goddess’s milk, his heart was filled with devotion for Śiva, and his career as an inspired poet began. The story, of course, suggests, using very concrete symbols, that Campantar’s inspiration and talent as a poet were divine in origin.

The doctrine of *aṃśāvatāra* (partial *avatāra*) in Śrīvaiṣṇavism explicitly asserts that the authors of the Tamil hymns, among other partial incarnations, are divine, though their divinity is subordinate to that of Viṣṇu himself. While I have not seen anything written on the subject, I was told by a professional reciter of Tamil Śaiva hymns that Tamil Śaivism recognizes six *avatārapuruṣas*, including the four most important saint-poets, Campantar, Appar, Cuntarar, and Māṇikkavācakar.²⁸ The term at least suggests that these poets are accorded a measure of divinity, and if this is the case, it helps to explain why these four are elevated above the other saint-poets in Tamil Śaiva doctrine. The term *camayācārya* (preceptor of the faith), by which these four are known, suggests a similar conclusion. As *ācāryas*, or teachers, the four saints are assimilated to the prototype of all Śaiva *ācāryas*, Śiva in his form Dakṣinamūrti, the teacher.

What we do not find in Tamil Śaivism is a figure who plays a role comparable to that of Maturakavi in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. Maturakavi, as we saw, became a devotee of Nammālvār, consecrated an image of the saint, and introduced the saint’s hymns into temple ritual, thereby bringing the saint’s hymns to a community of worshipers. We find only very faint parallels on the Śaivite side. The saints Campantar and Appar are said to have known one another and to have shared a great mutual respect and affection. In similar manner, the saints Cuntarar and Cēramāṇ Perumāḷ are said to have been close friends. However, these are more or less symmetrical relationships, whereas Maturakavi worshiped Nammālvār as his god. According to Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, Nammālvār sang his songs to Viṣṇu in a state of rapture, without regard for his social surroundings, and it is Maturakavi who made his hymns accessible to the Vaiṣṇava community. The *Tēvāram* poets, in contrast, are noted for the extensive pilgrimages they made and for forging a community of Tamil Śaivites by bringing their poems before the public as they moved from place to place. In fact, Appar and Campantar are credited with converting kings of the Pallava and Pāṇṭiyaṇ dynasties, respectively, from Jainism to Śaivism.

²⁸ My informant was P. A. S. Rajasekharan, *ōtuvar* at the Kantaswami temple in Madras city. The word *ōtuvar*, used in Tamil Śaivism to denote a professional reciter of the hymns, means literally “he who recites.”

The second part of the Śrīvaiṣṇava model also can be matched with suggestive but only partially articulated parallels in Tamil Śaivism. Like the Vaiṣṇava hymns, the hymns of the Śaiva saints are said to have been effectively lost to the Śaiva community for a period of time after the age of the saints. We have seen that Śrīvaiṣṇavism credits Nāthamuni with recovering the hymns of the Vaiṣṇava saints, arranging them in canonical form, and reviving the practice of reciting them in the temple. Two figures are credited with similar achievements in Tamil Śaivism. One of these is a Cōḷa king, often identified with Rājārāja Cōḷa (reigned A.D. 985–1014); the other is a priest at a temple of the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa, Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi by name. The king embarked on his mission to recover the hymns of the Śaiva saints after hearing a short excerpt from the *Tēvāram* hymns sung by a devotee at his court.²⁹ He sought the aid of Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi, who in turn petitioned the god Gaṇeśa to fulfill the king's wish. The god revealed that manuscripts of the hymns were to be found in a sealed chamber at the Śiva temple at Chidambaram, and eventually the hymns were recovered and their recitation (re)introduced into the temple ritual.³⁰

Like the *Nālāyirattiviyaṭirapantam*, the *Tirumuṟai* were, in a sense, recovered through divine intervention. Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi, like Nāthamuni, recited the saints' hymns before the deity in a temple; and like the Śrīraṅgam temple in the Śrīvaiṣṇava context, the Śaiva temple at Chidambaram is a major center of sectarian activity. However, I find no explicit indication that Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi took on the personae of the Śaiva saints when reciting their hymns (nor do we find any compelling evidence to the contrary). The same holds true with respect to the temple functionaries, known as *ōtuvars*, whose duty it is to recite the *Tirumuṟai* hymns in the temple. Indira Peterson, who has studied the *ōtavar* tradition in depth, has concluded that, when an *ōtavar* recites a hymn of one of the saints, he, in effect, expresses his personal devotion to Śiva through the vehicle of the hymns.³¹ Her conclusion and the evidence on which it is based support the idea that the reciter establishes contact with the deity by "stepping into" the

²⁹ The stories of the redaction of the saints' hymns in Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva contexts display some striking parallels. Nāthamuni began his quest to recover the *ālvārs'* hymns after overhearing a devotee reciting a surviving hymn from the corpus. Both stories suggest a "golden age" of devotion—the age of the saints—followed by a period of lapse and a subsequent period of revival and institutionalization.

³⁰ According to the traditional story, recounted in the *Tirumuṟai Kaṇṭa Purāṇam* by Umāpati Civācāriyar (early fourteenth century), the majority of the *Tēvāram* hymns were lost to the ravage of white ants, but those hymns appropriate to the present day and age were spared the scourge.

³¹ See Peterson, "The Role of the Songs of the Tamil Śaivite Saints in the Formation and Preservation of Tamil Śaivite Sectarian Identity" (n. 5 above).

persona of the saint. Thus it appears that in Tamil Śaivism, as in Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the devotee enters into a relationship with the deity through a series of identifications that ultimately lead back to the bond joining saint and god.

A RHETORIC OF BHAKTI

The model of bhakti poetry developed here is rhetorical insofar as it concerns the interaction between author and audience and the ways that interaction has been conceived in sectarian discourse. However, the “rhetoric” we are dealing with here is of a special kind because the performance and reception of bhakti poetry involves not so much the communication of a message from author to audience as a profound communion between the two. The hymns themselves are the instrument of that communion.³² The communion between author and audience, which, as we have seen, is a communion between devotee and god (with each taking both roles), has profound theological significance. The aesthetic/rhetorical process, as described here, is, in the final analysis, a process of divinization, and the hymns fuel that process. Through an all-consuming enjoyment of the sacred hymns, one experiences bhakti, and the experience of bhakti itself transforms the experiencer. Devotion engenders divinity in the devotee; thus the perfected devotee or saint is treated as a divine being.³³ The sacred hymns, an important catalyst for devotion, originate in god and are offered back to god—the rhetoric of bhakti is cyclical. The experience of devotion that they engender and the divinity that follows from this experience also “circulate” in this system.

At least two aspects of this system suggest associations with pervasive themes in Hindu thought—what I shall call “closed circuitry,” for lack of a better term, and the idea that verbal sound substantially affects states of being (of objects, humans, forces of nature, etc.). The closed circuit view of the universe is ably described by David Shulman:

The world is born, or reborn, out of the violent destruction of a former creation . . . ; life is born out of death. . . . Man and other creatures live by devouring other forms of life; the dead make the earth fertile and, by dying, create space for the living. . . . The sacrifice is, in essence, an attempt to force

³² This distinction was made by V. Narayana Rao in his comments on an earlier version of this paper that I presented at the thirty-fourth annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in Chicago, April 2–4, 1982.

³³ Raymond Williams shows in his study of the Swami Narayan religion of Gujarat that the close association of divinity with perfect devotion is a vital theme in modern-day Hinduism (see Raymond B. Williams, “Holy Man as Abode of God in the Swami Narayan Religion,” in *Gods of Flesh/ Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*, ed. Joanne Waghorne and Norman Cutler [Chambersburg, Pa.: Anima Press, 1984]).

the process of creation: one kills, and in killing creates a vacuum that must attract more life. . . . The Hindu universe is a closed circuit: nothing new can be produced except by destroying or transforming something else. . . . Life and death are two facets of a single, never-ending cycle.³⁴

This closed circuit view of the universe is closely related to Hindu cyclic views of time and is demonstrated in cosmology, in seasonal and life cycle rituals, and in the doctrine of transmigration. The bhakti model resembles this view in that it is cyclic and the instrument of devotion, in the form of the Tamil hymns, passes back and forth between the devotee and god in a kind of closed circuit. But it is not a completely closed circuit, for devotion and divinity are not finite. If we consider only the canonized saint-poet, the model is indeed a closed circuit, but if we allow that virtually anyone may enter the model by identifying with the saint, we are still dealing with a circuit, albeit an expandable one. The bhakti view is similar to the sacrificial view in some ways, but the two are not identical.

The topic of sacrifice leads naturally to another comparison—a comparison between the Vedic (Sanskrit) *mantra* (an essential element of ancient sacrificial ritual), as sacred verbal sound, and the sacred Tamil hymns. Both are more than mere conveyors of information. They do something; they effect change. The Vedic *mantra* “fuels” the transactions between the sacrificer and the gods that constitute the core of sacrificial ritual. The *mantra* creates an environment in which the sacrificial offering made by the sacrificer to the gods will result in the gods reciprocally bestowing bounty on the sacrificer. The saints’ hymns also “fuel” the flow of devotion and divinity in the bhakti model, but the mechanics involved are fundamentally different. The Vedic *mantra* is “objectively” effective. As long as it is correctly uttered by a qualified ritualist, its power is necessarily unleashed. The ritualist’s success or failure in comprehending the words he utters or in aesthetically appreciating them is not a relevant factor. However, in bhakti, aesthetics is everything. In order to experience devotion and thereby attain divinity, the devotee must savor the words of the saints’ hymns and take them to heart. The words are effective if and only if they trigger a psychological and emotional response. The sacredness of the saints’ hymns is to be located not so much in external, objective features of sound as in internal, subjective states of mind that are reflected in and transmitted by the hymns. What is essential is the devotee’s experience of the hymns.

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³⁴ David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 90.

Introduction

The poems in this book are some of the earliest religious poems about Viṣṇu, or Tirumāl, the Dark One. The author is an ālvār, "[one] immersed in god"; the root verb *āl* means "to immerse, to dive; to sink, to be lowered, to be deep." The title *Hymns for the Drowning* plays on the meanings of such an immersion for poet and reader.¹

Tradition recognizes twelve ālvārs, saint-poets devoted to Viṣṇu.² Between the sixth and the ninth century, in the Tamil-speaking region of South India, these devotees of Viṣṇu and their counterparts, the devotees of Śiva (nāyaṇmār), changed and revitalized Hinduism, and checked the spread of Buddhism and Jainism while absorbing some of the features of these rivals. The saint-poets wandered all over the Tamil countryside, inspiring and converting kings, brahmans, and peasants, affirming in poetry the holiness of hundreds of Tamil places dedicated to Viṣṇu or Śiva. Their pilgrimages, their legends, and their hymns (which they sang by the thousand) literally mapped a sacred

¹ Immersion in god, "who is the deep of deeps" appears as a metaphor in various traditions: Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 425. For another kind of drowning, see p. 84; also the common phrase *saṃsārasāgara* "the ocean of life-in-the-world."

² The twelve ālvārs were Poykai, Pūtam, Pēy, Tiruppāṇ, Tirumālicai, Toṇṇaratippoti, Kulacēkaraṇ, Periyālvār, Āṇṭāl, Tirumāṅkai, Nammālvār and Maturakavi, in the order of their listing in the *Irāmānucanūṟṟantāti*, "the earliest and most authoritative work mentioning the Vaiṣṇava saints in chronological order." Kamil Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, pp. 155ff. Of these, the first three belong to the seventh century, the rest to the ninth. Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, pp. 155-62. To my knowledge, the traditional title *ālvār* does not occur in the poems.

geography of the Tamil regions and fashioned a communal self-image that cut across class and caste. They composed the most important early bhakti (devotional) texts in any Indian language. The two rival movements, despite differences in myth and ritual, created and shared a special idiom, a stock of attitudes and themes, and a common heritage alive to this day. A new generation of scholars has become interested in the ālvārs during the last ten years, but very little of the poetry is available in translation.³

The author of the poems in this book had several names, for example, Māraṇ and Caṭakōpaṇ, but he was best known as Nammālvār, "our own ālvār." He is considered the greatest of the twelve ālvārs. Anyone

³ During the last decade, a number of books and Ph.D. dissertations have appeared in English on the ālvārs: for instance, J. Filiozat, *Le Tiruppāvai d'Āṇṭāl*; A. Srinivasa Raghavan, *Nammalvar*; Friedhelm Hardy, "Emotional Kṛṣṇa bhakti" (which I have not been able to consult); Lynn M. Ate, "Periyālvār's 'Tirumoli'—a Bāla Kṛṣṇa Text from the Devotional Period in Tamil Literature"; K.K.A. Venkatachari, *The Maṇipravāla Literature of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas, 12th to 15th Century A.D.*; Katherine Young, "Beloved Places (Ukantaruḷḷanilaṅkaḷ): The Correlation of Topography and Theology in the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tradition of South India"; Vasudha Rajagopalan, "The Śrī Vaiṣṇava Understanding of Bhakti and Prapatti (from the ālvārs to Vedānta Deśika)"; Norman Cutler, *Consider Our Vow* and "The Poetry of the Tamil Saints." F. Gros, trans., *Le Paripāṭal*, and John B. Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja, an Essay in Interreligious Understanding*, are also directly relevant. The best-known earlier translations of the ālvārs are in J.S.M. Hooper, *Hymns of the Ālvārs*; however, it contains no translations from Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoli*. For recent and readable verse translations, see Raghavan (Nammālvār), Ate (Periyālvār), and Cutler (Poykai, Pūtam, Pēy, and Nammālvār selections). Kamil Zvelebil, *A History of Tamil Literature and Tamil Literature*, include literary and bibliographic discussions of the saints.

who reads his poems can see why: the poems are at once philosophic and poetic, direct in feeling yet intricate in design, single-minded yet various in mood—wondering, mischievous, tender, joyous, subtly probing, often touching despair but never staying with it. He composed four works, of which the 1,102 verses of *Tiruvāymoli* ("holy word of mouth"/"word of holy mouth"—"god-spell," if you wish), are the most important. Very early, the *Tiruvāymoli* was hailed as "the ocean of Tamil Veda in which the Upaniṣads of the thousand branches flow together."⁴

According to historians, Nammālvār was born into a peasant caste (veḷḷāḷa) and lived from approximately A.D. 880 to 930.⁵ Some would date him a century earlier. Although the facts are hazy, the legends are vivid and worth retelling. According to these latter, he lived for only 35 years. He was born in Tirukurukūr (today's Ālvārtirunakari, in Tamilnadu), into a princely family in answer to their penance and prayers. When he was born, the overjoyed mother gave him her breast but the child would have nothing of it. He uttered no

⁴ The phrase occurs in the opening Sanskrit panegyric appended to the Tamil text.

⁵ For the names, eulogies, and legends of Nammālvār, see Friedhelm Hardy, "The Tamil Veda of a Śūdra Saint," the best essay on the subject. The first full-length account occurs in *Garuḍavāhana's Divyasūricaritam* (12th-13th century) and Pinpaḷakiya Perumāḷ Jīyar's *Guruparamparāprabhāvam* (13th century).

Veḷḷāḷas of the Coromandel plain must not be underestimated. Their "ubiquity and prestige . . . has been a marked feature of agrarian society until the present time." Burton Stein, "Brahman and Peasant in Early South Indian History," p. 242. Nammālvār often calls himself a *nāṭaṇ*, "belonging to a *nātu*"; *nātu* probably meant agricultural councils concerned with secular as well as temple affairs—councils that were comprised of all four castes. Hardy, "The Tamil Veda," pp. 32-33. For dates, see Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*; Hardy prefers the 7th or early 8th century.

INTRODUCTION

sound, sat if seated, lay if laid down, seemed both deaf and mute. The distressed parents left the child at the feet of a local Viṣṇu idol. Once there, he got to his feet, walked to a great tamarind tree, entered a hollow in it and sat like a yogi in a lotus posture, with his eyes shut and turned inward.

Meanwhile, in North India, Maturakavi, a pilgrim poet and scholar, was wandering near the Ganges; suddenly he saw a light in the southern sky. He watched it for three days and followed it all the way to Kurukūr, where, having led him to the silent child in the tamarind hollow, it vanished. Maturakavi tried in vain to wake the yogi by clapping his hands and dashing stones on the temple walls. Finally, he went to the hole in the tree and asked, "Master, if the subtle [spirit] is embodied in the gross [matter], what will it eat, where will it rest?" The yogi at once replied: "*That* it will eat, and *there* it will rest!" Maturakavi realized at once that God was what the Master ate, and God was what he lived in. With that exchange, master and disciple found each other; the master broke his life-long silence and poured forth more than a thousand hymns to Viṣṇu. The thousand magnificent hymns, each beginning with the last word of the previous one, were one continuous poem—an icon for the endless, ever-changing forms of the Lord.

Such was Nammālvār's fame and importance that, soon after his death, images of him were installed in South Indian Viṣṇu temples, and revered as the very feet of God. In these temples today every worshiper's head receives the touch of a special crown that represents Viṣṇu's feet and our ālvār; it is named *caṭakōṇam* after him. He is called the "first lord of our lineage." He is the "body," the other saints are the "limbs." His poems have been chanted in temple services and

INTRODUCTION

processions since the eleventh century. Indeed, at the Śrīraṅkam temple a special ten-day festival is devoted to his work: a professional reciter (with the title *araiyar*, "king"), dressed in ritual finery, sings and enacts the hymns for the listening image of Lord Viṣṇu.⁶

A certain Nātamūṇi (10th century?) gathered and ordered the compositions of the twelve Vaiṣṇava saints and arranged for their recitation. According to tradition, he heard visitors from Nammālvār's birthplace of Kurukūr recite ten stanzas, and he saw that they were only ten out of a thousand. So he went to Kurukūr, worshiped Viṣṇu, and meditated as a yogi, but he failed to invoke the poet or receive the poems. Then he recited 12,000 times Maturakavi's praise-poems about his master, Nammālvār. Both Maturakavi and Nammālvār appeared to him in a vision and gave him a knowledge of the ālvār's four works. Some accounts say, he received all of the four thousand in this way. His grandson Yāmuna (10th-11th century), celebrated in Sanskrit the "impeccable [Tamil] scriptures" collected by Nātamūṇi. It is significant that both grandfather and grandson were priests at the Śrīraṅkam temple. Through them and through Rāmānuja (11th-12th century), a non-Sanskritic, non-brahmanical religious literature (Nammālvār was a śūdra saint) became central to brahman orthodoxy. Inscriptions as early as the 11th century mention endowments of land for the maintenance of reciters for the ālvār's hymns.

Nātamūṇi thus became the first link between the

⁶ K. Gnanambal, "Śrīvaiṣṇavas and Their Religious Institutions," pp. 126-27; V. N. Hari Rao, *Kōil Oḷugu, The Chronicle of the Śrīraṅgam Temple, with Historical Notes*, pp. 33-37. Reciters sing all the four thousand hymns in twenty-one days in Mārkaḷi month (December-January).

INTRODUCTION

saint-poets and the Viṣṇu temples, between text and ritual; he was the first of a long line of teachers (*ācāryas*) who formed the theology and the institutions of the "Śrī Vaiṣṇava" sect.

His compilation was called "The Four Thousand Divine Compositions" (*Nālāyira Divyaprabandham*), shortened to the "Four Thousand" (*Nālāyiram*) or the "Divine Composition" (*Divyaprabandham*). Orthodox Śrī Vaiṣṇavas deemed the Four Thousand equal to the four Vedas. Sanskrit and Tamil, the Vedas and the Four Thousand, were integrated in their domestic and temple services. The singers of the Tamil hymns led the temple processions, walked before the god; and the Vedas followed behind.

These texts are not merely the living scripture of an important sect; they have attracted many subtle and brilliant commentators. The Four Thousand, particularly Nammālvār's thousand verses in the *Tiruvāymoli*, and the commentaries stand at the head of a philosophic genealogy of all Vaiṣṇava ideas, culminating in Rāmānuja's qualified monism or monism-with-a-difference (*viśiṣṭādvaita*).⁷ As poems, they are the forebears of later traditions of Vaiṣṇava poetry, reaching as far as

⁷ Rāmānuja (ca. 1050-1137) "refuted the doctrine of Māyā (the world as illusion) propounded by Śaṅkara (7th-8th century), demonstrated that the upanishads did not teach a strict monism, and built up the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita which reconciled devotion to a personal God with . . . Vedānta by affirming that 'the soul though of the same substance as God and emitted from him rather than created, can obtain bliss not in absorption but in existence near him. . . .' Though he did not depart from the traditional caste organization of society, . . . he affirmed the universality of *bhakti* and the spiritual equality of the *bhaktas*. . . . He travelled all over India to spread his ideas and this may well have been the origin of the wide influence of his sect in North India." K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Culture and History of the Tamils*, p. 116.

INTRODUCTION

Caitanya in 16th-century Bengal and Tagore in our own times. Characteristic pan-Indian themes find some of their first and finest expressions in the poetry of the ālvārs—themes such as the Lord's creation as play (*līlā*), Viṣṇu's incarnations, Kṛṣṇa's childhood, Lord and devotee as lover and beloved, to name only a few. A number of these themes and their relation to Hinduism at large are explored in the Afterword.

This book contains eighty-three poems; seventy-six of them are selected from the *Tiruvāymoli*, and seven, love-poems in the classical style, from the *Tiruviruttam*. My arrangement is as much a part of the "translation" as my verse. The original verses are arranged in tens, which are in turn arranged (by the compilers) in hundreds, following a long Tamil tradition.⁸ Yet single verses have an existence of their own; they are quoted and recited as complete poems. Each group of ten is unified by meter, theme, and diction, but the transition from each group to the next is not always clear; commentators offer various schemes. I have taken the liberty of offering one of my own that, I think, also reflects the tradition. In doing so, I have sometimes brought together similar-looking poems from different parts of the original anthology, keeping in mind, and often playing on, an overarching rhythm of themes.

⁸ Numbers like "ten," "hundred," and "thousand" (*pattu*, *nūru*, *āyiram*) should be treated usually as generic names for verse arrangements. For instance, each "ten" of the *Tiruvāymoli* consists really of eleven poems. The eleventh is a signature and a meta-poem, a *phalaśruti* or *śruti-phala* (a recital of results) describing the merits of the ten verses and the good results they will bring to the devoted reader or listener. The *Tiruvāymoli*, called the fourth "thousand," really consists of 1,102 poems: ninety-nine sets of ten, plus one irregular set of twelve (for the twelve names of Viṣṇu) adding up to 1,002 hymns, plus 100 *phalaśruti* verses.

INTRODUCTION

For instance, I have cycles of love poems alternating with philosophic and other hymns, as in the original text. Such cycles and epicycles, with returning voices, roles, and places, are part of the "interinanimation" of these poems. I have placed ten poems on the works of Viṣṇu (his incarnations, etc.) at the beginning—for they weave into the allusive network of the other poems. My arrangement also enacts the progression: from wonder at the Lord's works, his play, his contrariety, to the experience of loving him and missing him, of watching others (one's friends, one's daughters) love him and suffer over him, to moods of questioning and despair, and on to an experience of being devoured, possessed, taken over, till the very poems that speak of him are of his own speaking.

To translate is to "carry across"; "metaphor" has the same root-meaning. Translations are transpositions; and some elements of the original cannot be transposed at all. For instance, one can often convey a sense of the original rhythm but not the language-bound meter; one can mimic levels of diction, even the word play, but not the actual sound of the words. Items are more difficult to translate than relations, textures more difficult than structure, words more difficult than phrasing, linear order more difficult than syntax, lines more difficult than pattern. Yet poetry is made at all those levels—and so is translation. The ideal is still Dryden's, "a kind of drawing after the life": "... to steer betwixt the two extremes of paraphrase and literal translation; to keep as near my author as I could, without losing all his graces, the most eminent of which are in the beauty of his words; and those words, I must add, are always figurative . . . taking all the materials of this divine author, I have endeavoured to make [him] speak such

INTRODUCTION

English as he would himself have spoken . . . in this present age."⁹

When two languages are as startlingly different from each other as modern English and medieval Tamil, one despairs. For instance, the "left-branching" syntax of Tamil is most often a reverse mirror image of the possible English. Medieval Tamil is written with no punctuation and no spaces between words; it has neither articles nor prepositions, and the words are "agglutinative," layered with suffixes. Moreover, the syntax is a dense embedding of clause within clause. I translate unit by syntactic unit and try to recreate the way the parts articulate the poem in the original. My English thus seems to occupy more visual space on the page than the adjective-packed, participle-crowded Tamil original. The "sound-look," the syntax, the presence or absence of punctuation, and the sequential design are part of the effort to bring the Tamil poems faithfully to an English reader. The Notes and the Afterword are aimed at translating the reader toward the poems. I have consulted various texts and commentaries in learning to read these poems. Chief among these are: the ten volumes of *Aṇṇaṅkarācāriyār* and the ten of Purushottama Naidu. I have used the standard *Tamil Lexicon* system to transliterate Tamil words.

Many years ago, John Carman urged me to translate the *ālvārs*. In 1976, in the subzero sun of a Minnesota winter, I read and reread the *Tiruvāymoli* with care, and these ancient poems came alive for me. My thanks are due to John Carman of Harvard, and to my friends at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota,—especially to Bardwell Smith, Eleanor Zelliott, and James Fisher.

⁹ John Dryden, "The Dedication of the Aeneis."

INTRODUCTION

Keith Harrison, poet and translator, read an entire earlier draft: his friendship has changed not only these poems. I also wish to thank Friedhelm Hardy, Vasudha Narayanan, Ronald Inden, James Lindholm, Wendy O'Flaherty, David Grene, Norman Cutler, Chirantan Kulashreshtha, and my wife Molly for criticism laced with kindness.

Chicago, 1980

Hymns for the Drowning

The Paradigm

We here and that man, this man,
and that other in-between,
and that woman, this woman,
and that other, whoever,
those people, and these,
and these others in-between,
this thing, that thing,
and this other in-between, whichever,
all things dying, these things,
those things, those others in-between,
good things, bad things,
things that were, that will be,
being all of them,
he stands there.

1.1.4

The Works of Viṣṇu—I

1 • HE PACES THE WORLDS

First, the discus
rose to view,
then the conch,
the long bow,
the mace,
and the sword;
with blessings
from the eight quarters,
he broke through
the egg-shell of heaven,
making the waters bubble;
giant head and giant feet
growing away from each other,
time itself rose to view:
how the lord
paced and measured
all three worlds!

7.4.1

2 • CHURNING THE SEA

That moment:

with the sound
of rivers streaming backward
into their mountains
and the sound
of the serpent
wrapped around the mountain
and the sound
of the sea churning
now left now right
the lord
drew out the gods' elixir
that rose slowly in the churning

7.4.2

3 • THE BOAR RESCUES THE EARTH

No, they did not come apart:
the seven islands of the earth,
they stayed in place;
and the seven mountains,
they stayed in place;
and the seven seas
did not go wild
but stayed in place
miraculously,
that day
our lord pitchforked them out
with his tusks
from the deep.

7.4.3

4 • A MEAL

Season
day and hour
went out of kilter
so did earth
water
the planets and the skies
fire
wind
the mountains and the stars:
O what a roaring meal
of chaos
our lord made
of the seven worlds!

7.4.4

5 • THE EPIC WAR

When our lord managed
that spectacular Bhārata war,
what noises!

Noise of well-fed wrestlers
falling in combat,
the jitter
of whole armies
of regal men,
and the noises of the gods
jostling in heaven
to watch the fun!

7.4.5

6 • THE MAN-LION

At the red hour of sunset,
there was blood
on the heavens and the eight directions.

Our lord
plunged the demon into despair
and slaughtered him:

a lion
tearing open
a mountain under his claws.

7.4.6

7 • THE SACK OF LANKĀ

Crowding each other
 face to face
as the arrows sang
 and jangled
demon carcasses fell
 in hundreds
rolled over
 like hills
the sea stained with blood
 backed upstream into the rivers
when our lord and father
ravaged the island
and left it
 a heap of ash

7.4.7

8 • THE DEMON OF ARROWS

The cock-bannered young god
ran away
the inflamed god of fire
ran away
even three-eyed Śiva
ran
when our lord and father
tackled the fleeing Demon of Arrows
and broke his fat arms

7.4.8

9 • CREATION

In that original moment,
our lord and father
made earth, water, fire, wind,
 and sky
 and the mountains;
made the two lights,
 sun and moon,
 and other such bodies;
then the rain,
 and all that lives by rain,
 and the gods of rain.

In that moment,
he made the worlds
for the first time.

7.4.9

10 • KRṢṢA LIFTS THE MOUNTAIN

The grazing cows tumble,
 the animals turn over,
the water in the mountain pools
 rushes down in waterfalls,
as our lord and father
lifts up the mountain
so his rich city,
 his City of Gateways,
might take shelter
against the downpour
 of heaven's evils.

7.4.10

My "Quite Contrary" Lord

1

My lord
 who's both dearth and plenty
 hell and heaven
 friendship
 enmity
 venom and sweet ambrosia
my ranging various lord:
I saw him there
 in Viṇṇakar
 city named Sky
 city of rich houses

6.3.1

2

He is both the crooked
 and the straight
the black
 the white
the truths
 the lies
youth and age
 the ancient and the new:
our lord lives
 in Viṇṇakar
 strong-walled well-made city
and his grove there
 is the triple world
 of the gods

6.3.5

3

Being all three worlds
and nothing
being desire
being rage
being both the flower-born Lakṣmī
and anti-Lakṣmī
black goddess of ill luck
being both honor and shame
our lord
lives in Viṇṇakar
city named Sky
which the gods worship lovingly
and in my evil heart
he lives forever
flame of flames

6.3.6

The Lord at Play

1

Worker of miracles,
magical dwarf,
and killer of the demon
named Honey,
only you can tell us:
becoming fire, water, earth,
sky, and wind,
becoming father, mother,
and the children too
and all others
and all things unnamed,
the way you stand there,
being yourself—
what's it all about?

7.8.1

O lord unending
 wearing honey flowers
 and basil leaf
 in your hair
 tell us this:
 as moon
 as sun
 as the amazing numberless stars
 as darkness
 and as torrents of rain
 as honor
 as shame
 and as death
 with his cruel eyes
 how fantastic
 can you get?

7.8.2

You do stunts
 with your chariots
 the discus your weapon:
 tell us how
 managing every one of the four ages
 becoming every little thing in them
 harmonious now
 now quite contrary
 you stand there
 a marvel
 of contradictions!

7.8.3

Dwarf,
 you confuse everyone.
 But make me understand:
 becoming oblivion, memory,
 heat, cold,
 all things wonderful,
 and wonder itself,
 becoming every act of success,
 every act of good and evil,
 and every consequence,
 becoming even the weariness
 of lives,
 you stand there—
 and what misery you bring!

7.8.6

You dwell in heaven
 stand on the sacred mountain
 sleep on the ocean
 roll around in the earth
 yet hidden everywhere
 you grow
 invisibly:
 moving within
 numberless outer worlds
 playing within my heart
 yet not showing your body
 will you always play hide and seek?

6.9.5

Love Poems: The Playboy

1

Don't tell us those lies,
heaven and earth
 know your tricks.
Just one thing,
 my lord of the ancient wheel
 that turns at your slightest wish:
while all those girls
—their words pure honey—
stand there
wilting for love of you,
don't playact here and sweet-talk
 our lisping mynahs,
 our chattering parrots!

6.2.5

2

Look here:
 being naughty,
 grabbing our dolls
 and doing wild things
won't get you anywhere;
we know you
 from old times,
how can we stand your pranks,
 your airs?
There are any number
 of lovely women,
 queens of the three worlds;
so don't torment
 this plain crowd.
Such stuff is childish,
 even for you.

6.2.6

Pure one,
 you devoured once
 the sea-surrounded world.

Great one,
 it isn't right to grab
 our dolls and toys.

What's wrong is wrong
 even for you.

You tease us with sweet talk:
 if my brothers hear of it,
 they won't wait to see
 right and wrong,
 they'll just bring out
 their sticks
 and beat you up.

6.2.7

Rich and perfect sound
 of strings
 on an ancient lute

other than all others
 that good men study

purity
 sweetness of sugarcane
 and ambrosia

O dark raincloud
 Kṛṣṇa

without you
 I'm not:
 take me

2.3.6

Questions

1

Suppose I have the three worlds
or even better

I become all of myself
as I could
only in heaven

would it ever be
like the goodness
the pleasure I feel
right here in this world

when I worship at the feet
of his men
who work at his feet

his body dark as thundercloud
feet covered with flowers
and anklets of war?

8.10.2

2

Would I, sinner that I am,
rather enter the fragrance,
the lotus feet
of our lord,

divine dwarf
making great his little body
till it overwhelms
all three worlds,

when my masters,
his great servants
who have taken on small
human lives,

are content to roam this world?

8.10.3

3

Where shall I reach you?
You are the three worlds
 in all their beauty
you are the three-eyed one
 the four-faced god
 and the rain king
 brandishing the lightning axe
 of diamond
and you are other gods as well
my lord
my cowherd
 cool flowers and fragrant basil
 in your hair
just where shall I reach you?

7.6.4

4

My cowherd
 my rough dark diamond
how will this self of mine
 ever-trammeled in the three
 worlds unfolding
 in your navel's lotus
how will it come through
 and reach you there
in your overwhelming world of light?

7.6.5

5

Feet, navel, hands,
chest, eyes, and lips
red-rayed jewels
set in a blue glow,
and golden silks round his waist,
my lord is all blaze and dazzle:
I do not know how to reach him.

7.6.6

6

Shedding pleasure
displeasure
birth illness
age
and death
when will I join
lit like a flame
those congregations
of my lord of illusions
my lord
who shelters the raining sky
and this earth
with his conch shell and wheel of fire?

2.3.10

7

Only men who live by the Vedas qualify,
can wear your feet on their heads,
 lord
 of blue-black body
 and eyes like lotuses,
but, you know, when the town's cattle moo
coming home,
the blind one moos too:
so I too speak of you,
how else?

Tiruviruttam 94

Love Poems: The Dark One

1

What She Said

Evening has come,
but not the Dark One.
The bulls,
 their bells jingling,
 have mated with the cows
and the cows are frisky.
The flutes play cruel songs,
 bees flutter in their bright
 white jasmine
 and the blue-black lily.
The sea leaps into the sky
and cries aloud.
Without him here,
 what shall I say?
 how shall I survive?

9.9.10

What She Said

Our Kannan dark as rain cloud
 has stolen my heart
 and it has gone away with him
 all by itself.

But this north wind
 seems ready for battle.

Gathering the sweet smoke of incense,
 the beauty of lutestrings,
 the fifth tune of night and love,
 and cool moist sandal

it blows and blows,
 culling on its way
 the fragrance of new jasmine,
 and it burns:

how can I say anything to anyone
 O mothers?

9.9.7

What Her Mother Said

O women,
 you too have daughters
 and have brought them up.

How can I tell you
 about my poor girl?

She talks of the conch shell,
 she talks of the wheel,
 and she talks, night and day,
 of the basil in his hair,

what shall I do?

4.2.9

What Her Mother Said

When she sees kings,
she says, I see my lord.

When she sees shapes and colors,
she leaps up, saying,
I see him who measured the world.

All temples with gods in their wombs
are, she says, places of the lord dark as the sea.

In terror, in love, in every mood,
she wants
the Dark One's anklets.

4.4.7

Waxing and Waning

These five senses—

they run into the ground
even the men

who serve the great lord of heaven—

if they get me

and if you too

let go of me

what will they not do?

Lord of all

you already know my song

my poem

my feeling

indweller of eyes

O inward of my heart

my words

come

say something

7.1.6

My head
 is the hill
 of the lord's gardens
 the ocean of milk
 my body
 the paradisaal dwelling-place of Viṣṇu
 Vēṅkaṭam hill
 cool and holy:
 O breath of life
 endlessly tangled in illusion
 heart
 word
 all my many acts
 he will not leave you
 not one fraction
 of one second
 the one
 the only one
 first person of all time

10.7.8

It's true
 even I am you
 even the unbearable hell
 of this world
 is you:
 this being so
 what's the difference?
 One may go to paradise
 and reach perfect joy
 or go the other way
 and fall into hell
 yet I being I
 even when I remember
 I am you
 I still fear hell:
 lord in perpetual paradise
 let me be at your feet.

8.1.9

For the sake of that girl,
 her mouth red as a berry,
 you broke the seven bulls;
 you bent the long bow
 and finished off the king
 of the island of towers;
 and you broke the tusk
 of that pedigreed elephant.

I haven't worshiped you
 with flowers and holy water
 at proper times;
 but then
 my heart is the only sandalwood
 to rub and perfume your body with,
 your body
 dark as *kāyā* blossom.

4.3.1

He is
 for he cannot *not* be
 for his men
 for others he is
 as if he is not
 our lord
 is here
 he lives here in me
 and we're done with
 growing and perishing
 waxing and waning
 like the moon—
 done with
 knowing
 and unknowing
 like sunshine and nightdark

8.8.10

You're what they said
 in the Good Old Books:
 "Than this
 there's nothing more subtle"
 you are that form
 and that formlessness
 everlasting
 you wear lotus and basil
 on your chest
 and whenever we say
 whatever we can
 it becomes you
 however we say it

7.8.10

Lotus-eyed,
 he is in my eyes.
 I see him now,
 for his eyes cleanse my sight;
 and all five senses
 are his bodies.

 Making possible
 a brahmā in the lotus
 and a śiva with an eye
 in his forehead,
 making the purest gods
 and the many worlds,
 he is right here
 in my brow.

1.9.9

Love Poems: You Too?

1

Since the time
time began
bringing water to the world
melting like me
and my girlfriends here
O sky
are you stricken too
by my lord
enemy of the demon
named Honey?
are you also
bless you
perishing for love of him?

2.1.5

2

One-day moon:
are you languishing too
like us
with no strength
to drive away the dark today,
faint
and shrinking,
jilted by the true-seeming words
of our lord
fast asleep
on the five-headed serpent,
our lord of the mighty wheel,
have you also lost
the natural light of your body?

2.1.6

You roam the seas,
 the mountains, the skies,
 you touch them lightly,
 cold north wind!
 Night and day,
 lit by alternate lamps
 of sun and moon,
 like us
 you wander sleepless:
 are you also craving,
 since the time
 time began,
 for a glimpse
 of our lord of the mighty wheel?

2.1.4

The Works of Viṣṇu—II

1 • BY RĀMA'S GRACE

Why would anyone want
 to learn anything but Rāma?
 Beginning with the low grass
 and the creeping ant
 with nothing
 whatever,
 he took everything in his city,
 everything moving,
 everything still,
 he took everything,
 everything born
 of the lord
 of four faces,
 he took them all
 to the very best of states.

7.5.1

2 • THE DWARF

When I didn't know a thing
you made me love
 your service
mixing inseparably
 with my soul
when I
 your servant
was in the illusion of unknowing:
you dwarf incognito
 who once said to great Bali
 "Give me space
 just three steps"
and cheated him of everything
before anyone knew

2.3.3

3 • BEFORE I COULD SAY

Before I could say,
 "He became cowherd
 fish
 wild boar,"
he became a million million.

1.8.8

4 • HE AND I

He who took the seven bulls
by the horns
he who devoured the seven worlds
made me his own cool place
in heaven
and thought of me
what I thought of him
and became my own thoughts

1.8.7

5

Three loves never part from him—
Lakṣmī, goddess of all good things,
the Earth,
and the simple cowherd girl.
Ruling three worlds,
devouring them altogether,
my lord rests on a banyan leaf:
darker than the sea,
Kaṇṇan,
child perching on my hip.

1.9.4

Love's Messengers

1

Is that you, little bird?
When I asked you to go
as my messenger to the great lord
and tell him of my pain,
you dawdled, didn't go.
I've lost my looks,
my dark limbs are pale.
Go look for someone else
to put sweet things
in your beak,
go now.

1.4.8

2

The cold wind threads through my bones.
Remembering only my faults,
my lord doesn't show me any grace.
Go ask him,
"What wrong did she do?"
Dear parrot gnawing at a bone,
please, go ask him.
I brought you up, didn't I?

1.4.7

Idiots, Monists, and Others

1 • GOD'S IDIOTS

Mumbling and prattling
the many names
of our lord of the hill
with cool waterfalls,
long strands of water,
while onlookers say,
"They're crazy,"
entering and not entering
cities,
standing still or swaying
before a laughing world,
they dance, they leap,
undone by feeling—
and the gods bow down
before them.

3.5.8

2

Master
of illusions
with no one equal
or above
form and breath of all things:
becoming mother and father
you made me know
what I couldn't know
I do not even know
the things you've done for me

2.3.2

3 • TALKING OF MONISM

If they should merge,
that's really good:
if the two that'll never meet
 should meet,
then this human thing
 will become our lord,
 the Dark One
 with the sacred bird
 on his banner—
as if that's possible.
It will always be itself.
 There are yogis
 who mistake fantasy
 for true release
and run around
 in circles
in the world
 of what is and what was
 and what will be.
It takes all kinds.

8.8.9

4 • LOGIC CHOPPERS

You believers in Liṅga mythologies
and you Jainas
you Buddhists
becoming all of you choppers of logic
becoming even your gods
he stands there
our lord:
come see him in Kurukūr
where rich ears of paddy
fan him like ceremonial yak-tails.
In this place without lies
come praise him.

4.10.5

No More Kings

1

My lord of a thousand names
gives and gives

the fame of his giving
crosses all boundaries

I cannot praise anyone else
cannot say to some paltry thing
of this world:

“Your hand is bounteous as the rain
your shoulders are strong as the mountains”

I cannot tell such barefaced lies

3.9.7

2

Kings

who rule the earth all alone
for long years

will one day hobble
on legs bitten by black dogs
and beg from a broken pot
here

in this very life
with the whole world watching:

don't tarry then

think of the lord's feet
and live

4.1.1

3 • OUR MASTERS

The four castes
uphold all clans;
go down, far down
to the lowliest outcastes
of outcastes:
if they are the intimate henchmen
of our lord
with the wheel in his right hand,
his body dark as blue sapphire,
then even the slaves of their slaves
are our masters.

3.7.9

Love Poems:
Four Returning Voices

1

What She Said

Making the earth shiver,
crowding and wetting the world
with their waters,
scratching with their hooves,
the dark blue bulls of heaven
fight with each other.

And I,
doing good and evil,
cannot tell what's before me:

is it or is it not
the cold monsoon
bearing the shape
of my dark lord,

speaking of his cruelty,
his going away?

Tiruviruttam 7

What He Said

The sight I see now
is rare indeed.

Even as I say, "Dear girl,
dear as our Dark One's paradise,
I've got to go away and far away
to get rich,"

her eyes
bring enough to buy a world,
eyes,
each large as the palm of a hand,
shaped like a carp,
dropping pearls
and grief yellow as gold.

Tiruviruttam 11

What She Said

Skin dark as young mango leaf
is wilting.

Yellow patches spread all over me.
Night is as long as several lives.

All these are the singular dowry
my good heart brings
as she goes over

to the cool basil
of my lord, the Dark One
with the wheel that cuts down demons.

Tiruviruttam 12

What She Said to Her Girlfriend

Dear friend,

dear as the Dark One's paradise,
night grows long, many lives long,
when we part;
or goes fast, a split second many times split,
when we are together.

So I suffer even when my lover joins me
many nights in a row,
and suffer again
when he goes away.

Blessed night, ever flowing,
is full of tricks,
plays fast and loose.

Tiruviruttam 16

What Her Foster Mother Said

She's young:

breasts not even full-grown;
hair thick, soft, but much too short;
her dress doesn't cover her waist
and her tongue stammers;

but her eyes,
so priceless
earth and sea cannot buy them,
they flash everywhere.

She's learning to say,
"Is Vēṅkaṭam
the hill of our Lord?"

Will she ever get there?

Tiruviruttam 60

What Her Girlfriend Said

They haven't flowered yet,
 the fat *konrai* trees,
 nor hung out their garlands
 and golden circlets
 in their sensual canopy of leaves
 along the branches,

dear girl,
 dear as the paradise of our lord
 who measured the earth
 girdled by the restless sea,

they are waiting
 with buds
 for the return
 of your lover
 once twined in your arms.

Tiruviruttam 68

My Lord, My Cannibal

My dark one
 stands there as if nothing's
 changed

after taking entire
 into his maw
 all three worlds
 the gods
 and the good kings
 who hold their lands
 as a mother would
 a child in her womb—

and I
 by his leave
 have taken him entire
 and I have him in my belly
 for keeps

8.7.9

I don't understand why,
 while all the worlds
 live within him
 and he lives within them
 by birthright,
 our lord of Kāṭkarai,
 of gardens blowing with fragrance,
 should assault
 and devour this poor little
 soul of mine
 with his grace.

9.6.4

While I was waiting eagerly for him
 saying to myself,
 "If I see you anywhere
 I'll gather you
 and eat you up,"
 he beat me to it
 and devoured me entire,
 my lord dark as raincloud,
 my lord self-seeking and unfair.

9.6.10

Love Poems:
A Case of Possession

1

"I made the world
surrounded by the sea," says she.

"I became the world
surrounded by the sea," says she.

"I once redeemed from the demon
the world surrounded by the sea," says she.

"I pitchforked with my tusks
the world once drowned in the sea," says she.

"I devoured once
the world surrounded by the sea," says she.

Such talk!

Can it be because our lord
of the world surrounded by the sea
has come and taken her over?

How can I explain
my girl who lives within this world
surrounded by the sea

to you people of this world
surrounded by the sea?

5.6.1

2

My girl, who's just learning to speak
says,

"I'm beyond all learning.
I'm all the learning you learn."

"I'm the cause of all learning,
I end all learning,
I'm the essence of all learning,"
says she.

Does my girl talk this way
because our lord of all learning
has come and taken her over?

How can I tell you,
O learned men!

5.6.2

"I'm the earth you see," she says.

"I'm all the visible skies," she says.

"I'm the fires,
the winds,
and the seas," she says.

Is it because our lord dark as the sea
has entered her and taken her over?

How can I explain my girl
to you who see nothing
but this world?

5.6.3

"I'm all that's being done," says she;

"all acts yet to be
and all past acts," says she.

"I eat the fruit
of all acts," says she,

"and make all others act."

Why does she act like this?

Is it because our lord with the lotus eyes
has taken her over?

How can I explain
our girl,
her lips red as a fruit,
her body lithe as a doe's,

how can I,
to you innocents
of this world?

5.6.4

The Takeover

1

Poets,
beware, your life is in danger:

the lord of gardens is a thief,
a cheat,
master of illusions;

he came to me,
a wizard with words,
sneaked into my body,
my breath,

with bystanders looking on
but seeing nothing,
he consumed me
life and limb,

and filled me,
made me over
into himself.

10.7.1

2

Becoming himself
filling and becoming all worlds
all lives

becoming him
who becomes even me

singing himself
becoming for my sake
honey milk sugarcane
ambrosia

becoming the lord of gardens too
he stands there

consuming me

10.7.2

I just said,
 "The grove and hill of my lord,"
 and he came down
 and filled my heart;
 he usually lives
 in the city of names
 south of the Kāvēri,
 river of diamonds.

10.8.1

My lord
 who lives in the city
 of names
 came here today
 said he'd never leave
 entered me
 filled my heart

I've caught him
 the big-bellied one
 not content yet
 with all that guzzling
 on the sevenfold clouds
 the seven seas
 the seven mountains
 and the world that holds them all

I've caught him
 I contain him now

10.8.2

5

Promising me heaven,
 making a pact with me,
today he entered this nest,
 this thing of flesh,
himself cleared away
 all obstacles
 to himself,
 all contrary acts,
our lord of the good city
 of names,
whose groves are humming with bees.

10.8.5

6

Instead of getting his praises
sung by the great poets
he
comes here today,
gently
makes me over into himself
and gets me to sing of him,
my lord of paradise.

7.9.6

He who devoured all seven worlds
 happily came
 and entered me
 and he will not leave now;
 from now on
 what's not possible
 for me?

At one stroke
 seven generations below
 and seven above
 have cleared a wilderness
 of trouble,
 and escaped hell,
 hot, endless hell.

2.6.7

Even as I said,
 "He became the master,
 took me as servant,"
 he came to me happily,
 all grace,
 my lord who became fish,
 tortoise, man-lion, dwarf, wild boar,
 and who'll soon be Kalki,
 occupied me, became all of me,
 my lord dark as raincloud.

5.1.10

A ship drowning,
calling out for help
in a lashing sea,

I tossed in this ocean of births
when the lord
 in his splendor,
 bearing wheel and conch,
called out to me: "O, O, you there!"
showed me his grace,
and became one with me.

5.1.9

My lord
 who swept me away forever
 into joy that day,
made me over into himself
and sang in Tamil
his own songs
through me:
what shall I say
 to the first of things,
 flame
 standing there,
what shall I say
 to stop?

7.9.1

"Why won't Hari come quickly to meet me?"
She incessantly asks her friend.

Lord Hari,
Rādhā suffers in her retreat.

6

She embraces, she kisses cloud-like forms
Of the vast dark night. "Hari has come," she says.

Lord Hari,
Rādhā suffers in her retreat.

7

While you idle here, modesty abandons her,
She laments, sobs as she waits to love you.

Lord Hari,
Rādhā suffers in her retreat.

8

May poet Jayadeva's song
Bring joy to sensitive men!

Lord Hari,
Rādhā suffers in her retreat.

9

Her body bristling with longing,
Her breath sucking in words of confusion,
Her voice cracking in deep cold fear—
Obsessed by intense thoughts of passion,
Rādhā sinks in a sea of erotic mood,
Clinging to you in her meditation, cheat!

10

She ornaments her limbs
When a leaf quivers or a feather falls.
Suspecting your coming,
She spreads out the bed
And waits long in meditation.
Making her bed of ornaments and fantasies,
She evokes a hundred details of you
In her own graceful play.
But the frail girl will not survive
Tonight without you.

11

"Indolent Krishna" is the sixth part in *Gītāgovinda*

THE SEVENTH PART



Cunning Krishna

As night came
The mood displayed cratered stains,
Seeming to haunt its guilt
In betraying secret paths
Of adulterous women,
Lighting depths of Brindaban forest
With moonbeam nets—
A spot of sandalwood powder
On the face of a virgin sky.

1

While the moon rose
And Mādhava idled,
Lonely Rādhā
Cried her pain aloud
In pitiful sobbing.

2

—¶ *The Thirteenth Song, sung with Rāga "Mālavā"* ¶—

Just when we promised to meet, Hari avoided the woods.
The flawless beauty of my youth is barren now.
Whom can I seek for refuge here?
My friend's advice deceives me.

3

I followed him at night to depths of the forest.
He pierced my heart with arrows of love.
Whom can I seek for refuge here?
My friend's advice deceives me.

4

Death is better than living in my barren body.
 Why do I blankly endure love's desolating fire?
 Whom can I seek for refuge here?
 My friend's advice deceives me.

5

The sweet spring night torments my loneliness—
 Some other girl now enjoys Hari's favor.
 Whom can I seek for refuge here?
 My friend's advice deceives me.

6

Every bangle and jewel I wear pains me,
 Carrying the fire of Hari's desertion.
 Whom can I seek for refuge here?
 My friend's advice deceives me.

7

Even a garland strikes at the heart of my fragile body
 With hard irony, like Love's graceful arrow.
 Whom can I seek for refuge here?
 My friend's advice deceives me.

8

I wait among countless forest reeds;
 Madhu's killer does not recall me, even in his heart.
 Whom can I seek for refuge here?
 My friend's advice deceives me.

9

Jayadeva's speech takes refuge at Hari's feet.
 Keep it in your heart like a tender girl skillful in love.
 Whom can I seek for refuge here?
 My friend's advice deceives me.

10

Has he waylaid some loving girl?
 Do his friends hold him by clever tricks?
 Is he roaming blindly near the dark forest?
 Or does my lover's anguished mind so tangle the path
 That he cannot come into this thicket of vines
 And sweet swamp reeds where we promised to meet?

11

When Rādhā saw her friend come back
 Without Mādhava,
 Downcast and tongue-tied,
 Suspicion raised a vision of some girl
 Delighting Krishna,
 And she told her friend.

12

—¶ *The Fourteenth Song, sung with Rāga "Cāsana"* ¶—

She is richly arrayed in ornaments for the battle of love;
 Tangles of flowers lie wilted in her loosened hair.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

13

She is visibly excited by embracing Hari;
 Her necklaces tremble on full, hard breasts.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

14

Curling locks caress her moon face;
 She is weary from ardently drinking his lips.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

15

Quivering earrings graze her cheeks;
 Her belt sounds with her hips' rolling motion.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

16

She laughs bashfully when her lover looks at her;
 The taste of passion echoes from her murmuring.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

17

Her body writhes with tingling flesh and trembling.
 The ghost of Love expands inside with her sighing.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

18

Drops of sweat wet the graceful body
 Fallen limp on his chest in passionate battle.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

19

May Hari's delight in Jayadeva's song
 Bring an end to this dark time.
 Some young voluptuous beauty
 Revels with the enemy of Madhu.

20

The lonely moon,
 Like the lotus face of Mura's foe,
 Wan in love's desolation,
 Is calming the surface of my mind.
 But the moon is Love's friend—
 It still inflicts his torments
 On my heart.

21

—*— *The Fifteenth Song, sung with Rāga "Gurjari"* —*—

Her rapt face shows the passion her lips feel kissing him;
 With deer musk he draws the form of a stag on the moon.
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

22

He lays an amaranth blossom in clouds of hair massed on her soft face—
 A shimmer of lightning shines in the forest where Love goes hunting.
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

23

He smears the domes of her swelling breasts with shining deer musk,
 He makes star clusters with pearls and a moonmark with his nail.
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

24

The dark sapphire bangle he slips over each lotus-petal hand
 Encircles her arm's cool pale supple stalk like a swarm of bees.
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

25

Her broad hips are a temple of passion holding Love's golden throne;
 He lays a girdle of gemstones there to mark the gate of triumph.
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

26

He applies a shining coat of lac to feet lying on his heart
 Like tender shoots tipped with pearls to honor Lakṣmī's place inside.
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

27

While Balarāma's fickle brother is delighting some pretty girl,
 Why does barren disgust haunt my bower of branches, tell me friend?
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

28

Jayadeva, king of poets, echoes Hari's merit in the mood of his song.
 Let evil dark-age rhythms cease at the feet of Madhu's foe!
 In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,
 Mura's foe makes love in triumph now.

29

Friend, if the pitiless rogue won't come,
 Why should it pain my messenger?
 He wantonly delights in loving many women.
 Why is this your fault?
 See! His tenderness in love
 Draws my heart to meet him.
 It is trying to break away
 From the pain of longing for him.

30

—¶ *The Sixteenth Song, sung with Rāga "Deśākhyā"* ¶—

His eyes flirt like blue night lilies in the wind.
 The bed of tender shoots won't burn her.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Careses her, friend.

31

His soft mouth moves like an open lotus.
 Arrows of love won't wound her.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Careses her, friend.

32

His mellow speech is elixir of honey.
 Sandal mountain winds won't scorch her.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Careses her, friend.

33

His hands and feet gleam like hibiscus blossoms.
 Cold moon rays won't make her writhe.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Careses her, friend.

34

His color deepens like rain-heavy thunderheads.
 Long desertion won't tear at her heart.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Careses her, friend.

35

His bright cloth shines gold on black touchstone.
Her servants' teasing won't make her sigh.
Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
Caresses her, friend.

36

His tender youth touches all creatures.
She won't feel the pain of terrible pity.
Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
Caresses her, friend.

37

Through words that Jayadeva sings
May Hari possess your heart!
Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
Caresses her, friend.

38

Sandalwood mountain wind,
As you blow southern breezes
To spread the bliss of love,
Soothe me! End the paradox!
Lifebreath of the world,
If you bring me Madhava
For a moment,
You may take my life!

39

Friends are hostile,
Cool wind is like fire,
Moon nectar is poison,
Krishna torments me in my heart.
But even when he is cruel
I am forced to take him back.
Women with night-lily eyes feel love
In a paradox of passion-bound infinity.

40

Command my torment, sandal mountain wind!
Take my lifebreath with arrows, Love!
I will not go home for refuge again!
Jumna river, sister of Death,
Why should you be kind?
Drown my limbs with waves!
Let my body's burning be quenched!

41

"Cunning Krishna" is the seventh part in *GitaGovinda*



THE EIGHTH PART



Abashed Krishna

After struggling through the night,
She seemed wasted by the arrows of love.
She denounced her lover bitterly
As he bowed before her, pleading forgiveness.

1

—¶ *The Seventeenth Song, sung with Rāga "Bhairavī" ¶*—

Blood-hot from a sleepless night of passion, listless now,
Your eyes express the mood of awakened love.
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

2

Dark from kissing her kohl-blackened eyes,
At dawn your lips match your body's color, Krishna.
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

3

Etched with scratches of sharp nails in the battle of love,
Your body tells the triumph of passion in gold writing on sapphire.
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

4

Drops of red lac from her lotus feet wet your sublime breast.
They force buds from the tree of love to bloom on your skin.
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

5

The toothmark she left on your lip creates anguish in my heart.
Why does it evoke the union of your body with mine now?
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

6

Dark Krishna, your heart must be baser black than your skin.
How can you deceive a faithful creature tortured by fevers of Love?
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

7

Why am I shocked that you roam in the woods to consume weak girls?
The fate of Pūtana shows your cruel childhood bent for killing women.
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

8

Jayadeva sings the lament of a jealous girl deceived by passion.
Listen, sages! Heaven rarely yields such sweet elixir.
Damn you, Mādhava! Go! Keśava, leave me!
Don't plead your lies with me!
Go after her, Krishna!
She will ease your despair.

9

The red stains her lac-painted feet
 Lovingly left on your heart
 Look to me like fiery passion
 Exposing itself on your skin.
 Cheat, the image I have of you now
 Flaunting our love's break
 Causes me more shame
 Than sorrow.

10

"Abashed Krishna" is the eighth part in *Gita-govinda*

THE NINTH PART



Languishing Krishna

Then, when she felt wasted by love,
 Broken by her passion's intensity,
 Despondent, haunted by Hari's
 Response to her quarreling,
 Her friend spoke to her.

1

--¶ *The Eighteenth Song, sung with Rāga "Gauri"* ¶--

Hari comes when spring winds, bearing honey, blow.
 What greater pleasure exists in the world, friend?
 Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
 He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

2

Your swollen breasts are riper than palm fruits.
 Why do you waste their rich flavor?
 Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
 He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

3

How often must I repeat the refrain?
 Don't recoil when Hari longs to charm you!
 Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
 He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

4

Why do you cry in hollow despair?
 Your girlfriends are laughing at you.
 Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
 He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

5

See Hari on his cool couch of moist lotuses!
Reward your eyes with this fruit!
Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

6

Why conjure heavy despair in your heart?
Listen to me tell how he regrets betraying you.
Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

7

Let Hari come! Let him speak sweet words!
Why condemn your heart to loneliness?
Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

8

May Jayadeva's lilting song
Please sensitive men who hear Hari's story!
Don't turn wounded pride on Mādhava!
He is proud too, sullen Rādhā.

9

When he is tender you are harsh,
When he is pliant you are rigid,
When he is passionate you are hateful,
When he looks expectant you turn away,
You leave when he is loving.
Your perverseness justly
Turns your sandalbalm to poison,
Cool moon rays to heat, ice to fire,
Joys of loveplay to torments of hell.

10

"Languishing Krishna" is the ninth part in *Gītāgovinda*

THE TENTH PART



Four Quickening Arms

As night came, he approached Rādhā,
Finding the force of her anger softened,
Her face weak from endless sighing.
At dusk she stared in shame at her friend's face
As Hari stammered his blissful words.

1

—¶ The Nineteenth Song, sung with Rāga "Deśavarāḍī" ¶—

If you speak, moonlight gleaming on your teeth
Dispels the dread darkness of fear.
Let your moon face lure my nightbird eyes
To taste nectar from your quivering lips!
Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

2

If you feel enraged at me, Rādhā,
Inflict arrow-wounds with your sharp nails!
Bind me in your arms! Bite me with your teeth!
Or do whatever excites your pleasure!
Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

3

You are my ornament, my life,
My jewel in the sea of existence.
Be yielding to me forever,
My heart fervently pleads!

Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

4

Frail Rādhā, even with dark lotus pupils,
Your angry eyes are like scarlet lilies.
As your arrows of love arouse emotion,
My black form responds with red passion.

Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

5

Let pearls quivering on full breasts
Move the depths of your heart!
Let a girdle ringing on round hips
Proclaim the command of Love!

Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

6

Your hibiscus-blossom foot colors my heart
As your beauty fills the stage of love.
Speak, soft voiced Rādhā! Let me dye your feet
With the rich liquid of gleaming red lac!

Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

7

Place your foot on my head—
A sublime flower destroying poison of love!
Let your foot quell the harsh sun
Burning its fiery form in me to torment Love.

Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

8

This graceful loving coaxing
Mura's foe spoke to Rādhikā
Triumphs in the joy Jayadeva sings
To delight his muse Padmāvati.

Rādhā, cherished love,
Abandon your baseless pride!
Love's fire burns my heart—
Bring wine in your lotus mouth!

9

Fretful Rādhā, don't suspect me!
A rival has no place
When your voluptuous breasts and hips
Always occupy my heart.

Only the ghost of Love is potent enough
To penetrate my subtle core.
When I start to press your heavy breasts,
Fulfill our destined rite!

10

Punish me, lovely fool!
Bite me with your cruel teeth!
Chain me with your creeper arms!
Crush me with your hard breasts!
Angry goddess, don't weaken with joy!
Let Love's despised arrows
Pierce me to sap my life's power!

11



THE ELEVENTH PART



Blissful Krishna

Your useless silence tortures me, frail Rādhā.
Sing sweet lyrics in the mode of love!
Tender girl, destroy my pain with your eyes!
Beautiful Rādhā, don't be indifferent!
Don't elude me! I am deeply devoted to you.
Lovely fool, I am here as your lover.

12

Your moist lips glow
Like crimson autumn blossoms;
The skin of your cheek
Is a honey-colored flower.
Fierce Rādhā, your eyes glower
Like gleaming dark lotuses;
Your nose is a sesame flower;
Your teeth are white jasmine.
Love's flower arms conquer worlds
By worshipping your face.

13

Your eyes are lazy with wine, like Madālasā.
Your face glows like the moonlight nymph Indumati.
Your gait pleases every creature, like Manoramā.
Your thighs are plantains in motion, like Rambhā.
Your passion is the mystic rite of Kalāvati.
Your brows form the sensual line of Citralekhā.
Frail Rādhā, as you walk on earth,
You bear the young beauty of heavenly nymphs.

14

"Four Quickening Arms" is the tenth part in *Gītāgovinda*



THE ELEVENTH PART



Blissful Krishna

Soothing Rādhā with his pleas,
Késava dressed elaborately
And went to lie on his thicket bed.
As night fell to blind prying eyes,
Rādhā dressed in gleaming ornaments
And one woman urged her to move quickly.

1

—¶ *The Twentieth Song, sung with Rāga "Vasantī"* ¶—

He made himself soothe you with flattery.
He made himself fall limp at your feet.
Now he waits for sensual play in his bed
On a bank of sweet swamp reeds.
Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

2

Your full hips and breasts are heavy to bear.
Approach with anklets ringing!
Their sound inspires lingering feet.
Run with the gait of a wild goose!
Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

3

Listen to enticing sounds of honey bees
Buzzing to bewilder tender women!
Sympathize when a flock of cuckoos
Sing Love's commands like bards.

Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

4

A mass of vines with thickly clustered shoots
Quivering in the wind like a hand
Seems to be gesturing to your tapering thighs
To quicken your pace. Stop loitering here!

Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

5

Strong waves of love throbbing in you
Suggest that you feel Hari's embrace.
Ask your rounded breasts if they wear
Seductive pearls or drops of pure water!

Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

6

Your friends know your armed body is ready
For passionate battle, fierce Rādhā,
By the war-drum beat of your clanging girdle.
Meet his rich mood without shame!

Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

7

As you cling to your friend in graceful play,
Nails on your hand are arrows of love—
Let your ringing bangles go to him!
Wake Hari! Claim his intimacy!

Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

8

Jayadeva's singing devalues necklaces;
It solves the paradox of beauty.
May it always adorn the throats
Of men who devote their hearts to Hari!

Madhu's tormentor
Is faithful to you, fool.
Follow him, Rādhikā!

9

"She will look at me, tell me a tale of love,
Feel pleasure in every limb from my embraces,
Delight in meeting me, friend," he says anxiously.
Your lover looks for you, trembles, bristles,
Rejoices, sweats, advances, falls faint
In the thicket buried in darkness.

10

Night is putting black kohl on their eyes,
Tāmāla-flower clusters on their ears,
Dark lotus wreaths on their heads,
Leaf designs of musk on their breasts.
In every thicket, friend,
The night's dark cherished cloak
Embraces limbs of beautiful adulteresses
Whose hearts rush to meet their lovers.

11

As saffron-bright bodies
Of women rushing to meet lovers
Streak the night
With clusters of light,
Night spreads darkness as dense
As tamāla leaves,
Making a touchstone
To test the gold of love.

12

Seeing Hari light the deep thicker
With brilliant jewel necklaces, a pendant,
A golden rope belt, armlets, and wrist bands,
Rādhā modestly stopped at the entrance,
But her friend urged her on.

13

—¶ *The Twenty-first Song, sung with Ṛāga "Cārāṇī"* ¶—

Revel in wild luxury on the sweet thicker floor!
Your laughing face begs ardently for his love.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

14

Revel in a thick bed of red petals plucked as offerings!
Strings of pearls are quivering on your rounded breasts.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

15

Revel in a bright retreat heaped with flowers!
Your tender body is flowering.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

16

Revel in the fragrant chill of gusting sandal-forest winds!
Your sensual singing captures the mood.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

17

Revel where swarming bees drunk on honey buzz soft tones!
Your emotion is rich in the mood of love.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

18

Revel where cries of flocking cuckoos sweetly sound!
Your teeth glow like seeds of ripe pomegranate.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

19

Revel in tangles of new shoots growing on creeping vines!
Your voluptuous hips have languished too long.
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

20

Consecrate your joyful union with Padmāvatī!
Enemy of Mura, grant a hundred holy blessings
While poet-king Jayadeva is singing!
Rādhā, enter Mādhava's intimate world!

21

Bearing you in his mind so long
Has wearied him, inflamed him with love.
He longs to drink your sweet berry lips' nectar.
Ornament his body with yours now!
He worships your lotus feet—a slave bought
With Śrī's flashing glance. Why are you afraid?

22

Her restless eyes were on Govinda
 With mixed alarm and bliss
 As she entered his place
 To the sweet sound of ringing anklets. 23

—¶ *The Twenty-second Song, sung with Rāga "Uṛāṭī"* —¶—

All his deep-locked emotions broke when he saw Rādhā's face,
 Like sea waves cresting when the full moon appears.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 24

He toyed with ropes of clear pearls lying on his chest,
 Like the dark Jumna current churning shining swells of foam.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 25

The soft black curve of his body was wrapped in fine silk cloth,
 Like a dark lotus root wrapped in veils of yellow pollen.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 26

Her passion rose when glances played on his seductive face,
 Like an autumn pond when wagtails mate in lotus blossom hollows.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 27

Earrings caressing his lotus face caught the brilliant sunlight.
 Flushed lips flashing a smile aroused the lust of passion.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 28

Flowers tangled his hair like moonbeams caught in cloudbreaks.
 His sandal browmark was the moon's circle rising in darkness.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 29

His body hair bristled to the art of her sensual play.
 Gleaming jewels ornamented his graceful form.
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 30

Jayadeva's singing doubles the power of Krishna's adornments.
 Worship Hari in your heart and consummate his favor!
 She saw her passion reach the soul of Hari's mood—
 The weight of joy strained his face; Love's ghost haunted him. 31

Her eyes transgressed their bounds—
 Straining to reach beyond her ears,
 They fell on him with trembling pupils.
 When Rādhā's eyes met her lover,
 Heavy tears of joy
 Fell like streaming sweat. 32

She neared the edge of his bed,
 Masking her smile by pretending to scratch
 As her friends swarmed outside—
 When she saw her lover's face
 Graced by arrows of Love,
 Even Rādhā's modesty left in shame. 33

"Blissful Krishna" is the eleventh part in *Gītāgovinda*



THE TWELFTH PART



Ecstatic Krishna

When her friends had gone,
Smiles spread on Rādhā's lips
While love's deep fantasies
Struggled with her modesty.
Seeing the mood in Rādhā's heart,
Hari spoke to his love;
Her eyes were fixed
On his bed of buds and tender shoots.

1

—The Twenty-third Song, sung with Rāga "Uṭṭarāṣā" —

Leave lotus footprints on my bed of tender shoots, loving Rādhā!
Let my place be ravaged by your tender feet!
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 2
I stroke your foot with my lotus hand—You have come far.
Set your golden anklet on my bed like the sun.
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 3
Consent to my love; let elixir pour from your face!
To end our separation I bare my chest of the silk that bars your breast.
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 4
Throbbing breasts aching for loving embrace are hard to touch.
Rest these vessels on my chest! Quench love's burning fire!
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 5

Offer your lips' nectar to revive a dying slave, Rādhā!
His obsessed mind and listless body burn in love's desolation.
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 6

Rādhā, make your jeweled girdle cords echo the tone of your voice!
Soothe the long torture my ears have suffered from cuckoo's shrill cries!
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 7

Your eyes are ashamed now to see me tortured by baseless anger;
Glance at me and end my passion's despair!
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 8

Each verse of Jayadeva's song echoes the delight of Madhu's foe.
Let emotion rise to a joyful mood of love in sensitive men!
Nārāyaṇa is faithful now. Love me, Rādhikā! 9

Displaying her passion
In loveplay as the battle began,
She launched a bold offensive
Above him
And triumphed over her lover.
Her hips were still,
Her vine-like arm was slack,
Her chest was heaving,
Her eyes were closed.
Why does a mood of manly force
Succeed for women in love? 10

Then, as he idled after passionate love,
Rādhā, wanting him to ornament her,
Freely told her lover,
Secure in her power over him.

11

---¶ *The Twenty-fourth Song, sung with Rāga "Rāmakaṛī"* ¶---

Yādava hero, your hand is cooler than sandalbalm on my breast;
Paint a leaf design with deer musk here on Love's ritual vessel!
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

12

Lover, draw kohl glossier than a swarm of black bees on my eyes!
Your lips kissed away the lampblack bow that shoots arrows of Love.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

13

My ears reflect the restless gleam of doe eyes, graceful Lord.
Hang earrings on their magic circles to form snares for love.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

14

Pin back the teasing lock of hair on my smooth lotus face!
It fell before me to mime a gleaming line of black bees.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

15

Make a mark with liquid deer musk on my moonlit brow!
Make a moon shadow, Krishna! The sweat drops are dried.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

16

Fix flowers in shining hair loosened by loveplay, Krishna!
Make a flywhisk outshining peacock plumage to be the banner of Love.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

17

My beautiful loins are a deep cavern to take the thrusts of love—
Cover them with jeweled girdles, cloths, and ornaments, Krishna!
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

18

Make your heart sympathetic to Jayadeva's splendid speech!
Recalling Hari's feet is elixir against fevers of this dark time.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

19

"Paint a leaf on my breasts!
Put color on my cheeks!
Lay a girdle on my hips!
Twine my heavy braid with flowers!
Fix rows of bangles on my hands
And jeweled anklets on my feet!"
Her yellow-robed lover
Did what Rādhā said.

20

His musical skill, his meditation on Vishnu,
His vision of reality in the erotic mood,
His graceful play in these poems,
All show that master-poet Jayadeva's soul
Is in perfect tune with Krishna—
Let blissful men of wisdom purify the world
By singing his *GitaGovinda*.

21

Bhojadeva's heir, Rāmadeva's son, Jayadeva,
Expresses the power of poetry
In the *GitaGovinda*.
Let his poem be in the voice
Of devotees like sage Parāśara.

22

"Ecstatic Krishna" is the twelfth part in *GitaGovinda*

mission or notation to assure that these names designate the same melodic patterns they do in later times. The fact that many commentators are preoccupied with defining the *rāgas* in terms of Indian music theory suggests that the songs were variously interpreted throughout their history.

3 Jayadeva's Language for Love

Poetry is distinguished from ordinary modes of speech by the controlled and stylized ways it strives to transcend the limits of ordinary language. The lyrical techniques of Jayadeva's songs combine with the conventional language of Sanskrit erotic poetry to express the intimate power of divine love.¹ As Jayadeva's elaborates the passion of Rādhā and Krishna, he creates an esthetic atmosphere of erotic mood (*śṛṅgārasa*) that is bliss for devotees of Krishna. The poet's aim is implied in an opening verse of the *Gītagovinda* (1.4):

If remembering Hari enriches your heart,
If his arts of seduction arouse you,
Listen to Jayadeva's speech
In these sweet soft lyrical songs.

The relation between esthetic and spiritual experience is made explicit in the signature verse of the final song of the poem (XII.19):

Make your heart sympathetic to Jayadeva's splendid speech!
Recalling Hari's feet is elixir against fevers of this dark time.
She told the joyful Yadu hero, playing to delight her heart.

The concept of mood, *rasa*, is at the heart of all Indian artistic expression. *Rasa* is literally the taste or flavor of something. The *rasa* of a verse, song, dramatic scene, or musical performance is the flavor of a pervading emotion (*śhāyibhāva*). Sanskrit poets and critics came to realize the unique power and the esthetic potential of sexual passion (*ratibhāva*) in its aspects of pain and pleasure.² The erotic mood that emerges from passion was expressed in the antithetical modes of "separation" (*vipralambhāśṅgāra*) and "consummation" (*sambhogāśṅgāra*). To experience this mood in the interplay of its two modes was considered the height of esthetic joy.³ Jayadeva created the religiously potent atmosphere of the *Gītagovinda* by exploring the poignant mood of separation within the broader play of divine passion in consummation.

Passion is transformed into erotic mood when a poet distills essential qualities from the confusion of spontaneous emotion and then patterns them according to universalizing rules of composition. Passion is made palpable through sensuous descriptions of movements and physical forms. Seasonal changes in nature and bodily signs of inner feeling are colored richly to create a dense atmosphere of passion.⁴ The theorists dictated that the gestures exposing a character's mental states must be subtle, expressive enough to arouse a sensitive audience but never so crudely detailed that they stimulate wanton desire.⁵ In the *Gītagovinda*, this restraint functions to make potentially pornographic subject matter the material of esthetic and religious experience.

In Jayadeva's environment of springtime (*sarasauvānta*, 1.27*), Rādhā and Krishna are vehicles (*vibhāva*) for the universalization of erotic emotion. These youthful figures with gleaming flesh and lotus-petal eyes manifest signs of emotion (*vyabhicāribhāva*, *sāttvikabhāva*) to communicate the passion of their separation. For Jayadeva, their longing and reunion is the concrete example of religious experience in which the disquieting distinction between "I" and "mine" versus "you" and "yours" is calmed.⁶ The esthetic experience of their love is the means for breaking the imaginary barrier dividing human from divine.

The poet's direct presence throughout the poem dramatizes his view that the discipline of esthetic perception is a way to enjoy Krishna's graceful love. Each signature verse is a variation on the idea that the emotional states of Rādhā and Krishna have religious power through the medium of the poet's lyric presentation.

Insight into Jayadeva's conception is found by following the way he presents his characters through the movement of the poem's twelve parts. After evoking Rādhā and Krishna in their secret erotic relationship and stating his own aim, Jayadeva invokes the ten cosmic incarnations of Krishna. He proceeds to present increasingly intimate aspects of Krishna's relation to existence, focusing on the suffering he shares with Rādhā in the frustration of their love. Krishna's ecstatic reunion with Rādhā within the forest thicket in springtime allows the poet's audience to witness the center of existence. The vision (*darsana*) of Krishna revealed through Rādhā at the end of the poem is a vision of the soul of his erotic mood (*ekāraṇa*, XI.24-31, song 22). Its effect is comparable with Krishna's manifestation to Arjuna in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Rādhā's heart, strengthened by the long trial of their separation and by the force of Krishna's suffering, is filled with erotic mood (*sarasauvāntas*, XII.1)

that is the consummation (*sambhogaśiṅgāra*) of the erotic, esthetic, religious experience Jayadeva creates for himself and his audience. This vision is contained within the structure of the poem, like the vision that climaxes a worshipper's controlled approach to the deity in the womb of a Hindu temple. On another level, the poetic perspective follows the movement of Rādhā's friend (*sakhī*), who goes between the parted lovers to describe the condition of each to the other. This perspective begins on Rādhā's side, but it subtly shifts to mediate between Rādhā and Krishna and bring them into union. The friend, the poet, and the audience share the experience of secretly participating in the play of divine love.⁷

The *Gītagovindā* begins with a classical verse indicating the subject of the poem.⁸

"Clouds thicken the sky,
Tāmāla trees darken the forest.
The night frightens him.
Rādhā, you take him home!"
They leave at Nanda's order,
Passing trees in thickets on the way,
Until secret passions of Rādhā and Mādhava
Triumph on the Jumna riverbank.

The place, the time, the characters, and their relationship in the poem are superficially clear in this verse. But details of the episode are rich in symbolism and have encouraged complicated interpretations of Jayadeva's meaning.⁹ Most interpretations turn on the identification of the speaker of the first half of the verse and on the reference to Krishna's "fear" and Rādhā's role as his guide through the dark forest. The opening speech is variously attributed to Krishna,¹⁰ Rādhā,¹¹ Nanda,¹² or even the friend of Rādhā.¹³ Jayadeva is characteristically ambiguous here—the many voices that are possible in the verse all direct the sexual energies of Krishna toward Rādhā, but each voice slightly shifts the quality of the darkness and of Krishna's fear. When we hear Krishna's foster-father, the cowherd-chief Nanda, address Rādhā, Krishna's youthful fear of the dark is suggested. When we hear Rādhā speaking to herself, the words suggest a woman sensing the sexual fear of her adolescent lover. When we hear Krishna himself speaking he is courting Rādhā in the veiled language of love, where feigned fear is a device of seduction. The composite voice further suggests that fear may relate to the cosmic age of darkness, the Kali Yuga, for which the union of Rādhā and Krishna is the cure.¹⁴

The darkness of the night in the forest is described in voluptuous sounds and imagery that echo through the entire poem.¹⁵ It is in this secret, sexually stimulating environment that Krishna and Rādhā enact the initial triumph of their divine love and then suffer the long night of separation that ends in their reunion. They follow the path through the forest as a pair, which Jayadeva calls Rādhā-Mādhava.¹⁶ The triumph of their passions occurs in this dual state, which is the defining structure of their relationship in the *Gītagovindā*. The "home" to which Rādhā brings Krishna is a forest thicker (*kuñja*), the secret place of their divine love, in which they meet again at the end of their journey.

The erotic mysticism of the *Gītagovindā*, which inspired the Vaishnava saint Caitanya, was interpreted allegorically by Caitanya's followers in terms of the Sahajiyā doctrine of devotional esthetics (*bhaktirasa*);¹⁷ they used love as a metaphor whose primary reference was a metaphysical conception. Although many elements in the *Gītagovindā* are codified in the Sahajiyā doctrine of love, this reading seems artificial. Jayadeva's verses nowhere praise unbodied joy; they are explicitly sensual, and celebrate the sensual joy of divine love. Through imagery, tone color, and rhythm, Jayadeva interweaves levels of physical and metaphysical associations, and the cosmic energy of Krishna's love with Rādhā is condensed into a religious ecstasy.

4 Krishna: Cosmic Cowherd Lover

Krishna's mythology is ancient and complicated, emerging in the earliest levels of the epic *Mahābhārata* and developing through the various phases of Purāṇic literature. The history and significance of the Krishna legend has been analyzed in numerous scholarly studies; the summary that follows borrows freely from them.¹

The process of Krishna's deification is discernible in epic literature. In the accounts of him in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Hariṣaṁśa*, his character is a transparent composite of a cowherd hero and a tribal chief who is also a form, or an incarnation (*avatāra*), of the god Vishnu. The mundane and cosmic levels of his activity are interwoven in the narratives to encompass elements from various sources in a complex mythic structure.² The basic account includes Krishna's miraculous birth, his concealment

4

Krishna in the Tenth Book of the *Bhagavata Purana*

Edwin F. Bryant

Although Krishna is perhaps best known in the West as the speaker of the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*, “The Beautiful History of God,” popularly referred to as the *Bhagavata Purana*, or just the *Bhagavata*, that is the principal textual source dedicated to the actual narrative of Krishna’s incarnation and activities.¹ It has not been Krishna’s influential teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita* or his statesmanship in the *Mahabharata* that have produced the most popular and beloved stories about this deity. Rather, it has been his childhood *lilas*—play, pastimes, or frolics—during his infancy, childhood, and adolescence in the forests of Vrindavan, popularly known as Braj, among the cowherd men and women that have been most especially relished all over the Indian subcontinent over the centuries. This very personal depiction of God is the primary subject matter of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata Purana*.

The *Bhagavata* forms part of a corpus of texts known as the *Puranas*. The word *purana*, in Sanskrit, signifies “that which took place previously,” that is to say, “ancient lore.” These texts are vast repositories of social, cultural and religious information and devotional stories about the gods and their devotees such that almost everything that has come to be associated with “modern Hinduism” has its roots in the *Puranas* (see introduction). Several *Puranas* list the total number of *Puranas* as eighteen, one of which is the *Bhagavata*. The *Bhagavata Purana* occupies itself almost exclusively with Vishnu and his incarnations, and most particularly, in its tenth book, with the incarnation of Krishna. The work consists of twelve

skandhas—cantos, subdivisions, or books—out of which the tenth book disproportionately makes up about one-quarter of the entire text.

It is this tenth book that has caused the *Purana* to be indisputably recognized as the most famous work of *Purana* literature, and this can be evidenced by the overwhelming preponderance of traditional commentaries on the text. Whereas most of the other *Puranas* have produced no traditional commentaries at all, and others only one or two, the *Bhagavata* has inspired eighty-one commentaries in Sanskrit alone that are presently available, and there were others that are no longer extant.² It has been translated into almost all the languages of India, with forty or so translations on record in Bengal alone. It was the first *Purana* to be translated into a European language: three different French translations were completed between 1840³ and 1857, and these were followed, in turn, by a translation of the *Panchadhyaya*, the five chapters of the tenth book dedicated to Krishna's amorous pastimes with the *gopis*, in 1867, again in French.

The *Bhagavata* is unambiguously a Vaishnavite text (that is to say, it views Vishnu as the supreme deity), and its first nine books discuss in greater or lesser detail all the major incarnations prior to Krishna. The entire tenth book (which takes up about four thousand out of a total of a claimed eighteen thousand verses)⁴ is dedicated to Krishna, and, indeed, as in the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is Krishna under his title of Bhagavan who gives his name to the entire *Purana*. While the *Bhagavata Purana*, then, is a Vaishnavite text in general, it is a Krishna-centered text in specific. Indeed, the Krishnaite theologies that emerged in the sixteenth century, initiated by influential teachers such as Vallabha and Chaitanya, find grounds to hold that it is not Krishna who is an incarnation of Vishnu but Vishnu who is a partial manifestation of Krishna. These sects extol Krishna as the supreme Absolute Truth from whom all other deities, including Vishnu, evolve, and the *Bhagavata Purana* is presented as the epistemological authority in this regard.

It is a thoroughly inconclusive task to assign specific dates to the *Puranas*, as exemplified by the considerable variation in the dates assigned by scholars to the *Bhagavata* itself. Not the least of the problems is that the *Puranas* are a fluid body of literature that went on transforming along the centuries through the process of transmission and adaptation. Unlike the genre of texts known as *shruti*,⁵ which could never be tampered with, the *Puranas*, which are *smriti*,⁶ had much more flexible expectations associated with them. While nonetheless sacred and authoritative, the *Puranas* transmit information for the general populace, and thus adjustments according to the day and age are not viewed askance—indeed, such fluidity is inherent in the claim made by most *Puranas* of presenting the “essence” of the *Veda* according to time and place, of explaining, expanding on, and even superseding the contents of previous scriptures, of revealing secret truths not contained elsewhere. They are thus ongoing revelation.

As the story goes, Vyasadeva, in the *Bhagavata* (1.5.1 and following), remained unfulfilled after compiling all the *Vedas*, the great Mahabharata Epic, and other *Puranas*, until the sage Narada informed him that the cause of his despondency was that he had not described the highest goal of knowledge. The result was the *Bhagavata*, the *galitam phalam*, the ripened fruit of the Vedic tree (1.1.3). Indeed, the *Bhagavata* describes itself as the essence of all the *Vedas* and *Itihasa* Epic (1.2.3; 1.3.42).

While the present *Puranas* contain recent material that can be traced well into historical times, they also contain ancient narratives and anecdotes from the earliest period of protohistory in South Asia.⁷ It is thus futile to speak of absolute dates for any *Purana* as a whole, since one would have to speak of the age of individual sections within individual *Puranas*. I will simply note here that most scholars hold that the bulk of the material in most of the eighteen *Puranas*, as we find them today, was compiled by the Gupta period in around the fourth–sixth century C.E.⁸ Understandably, then, there is no consensus regarding the date of the *Bhagavata Purana*, that is to say, the version of the text that has been handed down in its present form, although a number of scholars have considered it to be the latest of the eighteen primary *Puranas* composed in the South. There are a number of reasons to question this view,⁹ and I am inclined to leave open the possibility that the *Bhagavata*, too, could have reached its final compilation in the Gupta period along with the other *Puranas*.

In terms of theology, in the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsha*, and the *Vishnu Purana*, there is no doubt that Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu the transcendent Supreme Being. The roles, for the most part, have been somewhat reversed in the *Bhagavata*, as already mentioned: while there are abundant passages in the text that relate to Vishnu without explicitly subordinating him to Krishna, particularly in the books prior to the tenth, the general thrust of the tenth book prioritizes Krishna. In many ways, the very structure of the *Purana* culminates in the story of Krishna's incarnation, with the first nine books forming a prologue to the full glory of *Bhagavan* in the tenth book.

The books prior to the tenth teach various aspects of *bhakti-yoga*, the path of devotion, and are actually mostly associated with Vishnu as the goal of devotion. The reader of the text encounters the most famous Vaishnava role models in the first nine books—Prahlada, Dhruva, Gajendra, Ajamila, Bali, and so on—and these and other well-known stories familiarize the devotee with the requirements and expectations for the path, as well as providing illustrations of successful exemplars. The tenth book reveals the goal: Lord Krishna himself. Thus the prior books prepare the reader for the *Bhagavata*'s full revelation of God's personal nature that is disclosed in the tenth book, a fact suggested by the *Purana* itself (2.10.1–2). In this, the *Bhagavata*, along with the *Gita*, which also promotes Krishna as the Supreme Being, is one of the two primary sources of scriptural authority that the Krishna sects rely on in

their prioritization of Krishna as the highest Absolute Truth and personal godhead.

The crucial verse in the *Bhagavata* the Krishna theologians utilize to justify the preeminence of Krishna over all other manifestations of godhead is 1.3.28. Situated after a number of verses listing previous incarnations, this verse says: “These [other incarnations] are *amsha*, or *kala*,¹⁰ partial incarnations, but *krishnas tu bhagavan svayam*, ‘Krishna is *Bhagavan*, God, himself.’” This verse becomes something of a *mahavakya*, a “pivotal,” “most important,” or “representational statement” for the theology of the Krishna sects.

In terms of its philosophy, traditional sources enumerate six schools of thought that emerged from the Upanishadic period of the late Vedic age. The philosophy of the *Bhagavata* is a mixture of Vedanta¹¹ terminology, Samkhyan metaphysics,¹² and devotionalized *yoga* praxis.¹³ Correlating the *Ishvara*, personal God, of the Yoga and Nyaya schools and *Brahman*, the absolute truth underpinning all reality, from the Upanishads and the Vedanta tradition, with Krishna, the tenth book promotes Krishna as the highest absolute personal aspect of godhead—the personality behind the term *Ishvara* and the ultimate aspect of *Brahman*. It is especially of great importance to the compiler of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata*, given the authoritative nature of the *Vedanta Sūtras*, to stress that Krishna is *Brahman*, the absolute truth beyond matter (10.14.32; 10.10.33; 10.13.61; 10.40.29; 10.49.13; 10.73.23; 10.85.39). The text repeatedly stresses that Krishna’s body is not made of *prakṛiti*, matter, like the forms of this world (10.2.42; 10.14.2) but is pure *Brahman* (10.3.24; 10.80.17), made up of pure bliss and knowledge (3.13; 10.13.54; 14.22; 48.7), and pure being (10.3.24; 10.3.13). Krishna is beyond the flow of the *gunas*, which are the activating forces and essential ingredients inherent in the production of the *prakṛitic* bodies of earth, water, fire, air, and ether (10.3.19; 10.3.24; 27.4; 37.22; 27.4; 29.14, etc.).¹⁴

It is also important to note that the tenth book of the *Bhagavata* does not subsume Krishna’s form, or personal characteristics, as a secondary derivation from some higher impersonal absolute, as the various monistic sects of Vedanta propose. It is never said that Krishna’s form and personality ultimately and eventually merge or dissolve into some supreme formless and impersonal Truth. While *Brahman* is described in the usual impersonal Upanishadic phraseology in many sections of the text, particularly in the earlier books, the indications from the tenth book are that *Brahman* also contains an eternal personal element, a realm where Krishna and his form are eternal.¹⁵

In terms of Krishna’s descent into the world, the tenth book can be divided into two distinct sections equal in size: the childhood pastimes of Krishna in Vrindavan, called Braj *līlā*, and the post-Vrindavan adult activities. The moods of the two sections are quite distinct. Many of the chapters in the second section contain stories of Krishna’s battles with numerous demoniac kings, narrations of his heroic martial exploits, descriptions of his winning the hands of

his various wives, and accounts of his statesmanship and lavish royal household life. The second section is regal and resonates far more closely with the tone of the *Mahabharata* than does the first section. The stories of the first section, in contrast, paint a delightfully different and far more intimate picture of the Supreme Being, and it is in this section that the term *lila*, a term essential to the understanding of the theology of the text and of the devotional traditions predicated upon it, as is shown by numerous contributions to this volume, occurs most frequently. The term *lila* suggests pure play, or spontaneous pastime, and it is in this first section that we find God stealing butter from his mother, feeding it to the monkeys, and hiding from her in fear as she chases him with a stick; it is also here that we find the supreme *Brahman* making love to the married cowherd damsels in the forests of Braj—in other words, here we find God at play.

Although, in a sense, all of God's activities, including creation, are play, the proper noun *lila* is especially used in the tenth book of the *Bhagavata* when God is enjoying himself in the beautiful and idyllic landscape of Braj, interacting with his friends and loved ones, devoid of any sense of mission or purpose. It is rarely used once Krishna leaves Braj and sets out to accomplish his mission and fulfill his promise to Brahma to kill demons (although sometimes it is used in the instrumental form when he dispatches demoniac adversaries in the sense of “effortlessly” or “playfully”), and it is never used in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* presents us with Krishna as God in the mood of teacher imparting spiritual knowledge, and the *Mahabharata* presents us with Krishna as God in the mood of diplomat machinating to bring about the destruction of the hosts of armies so as to remove the burden of the earth; both depict God with a mission. The Braj section of the tenth book presents us with a description of God with no agenda other than to engage in *lila* with his most intimate devotees.

According to the *Bhagavata* (10.47.58), to be an intimate associate of God able to play with him by participating in this *lila* is the highest possible perfection of human existence. The ecstatic states of love experienced by the dwellers of Braj are not paralleled anywhere else in the text; the adult post-Braj relationships of Krishna with his other devotees seem quite formal in contrast. As such, the residents of Braj are the ultimate role models for the devotional path of *bhakti-yoga*: upon seeing the intense devotion of Krishna's devotees in Braj, Uddhava hankers to be a shrub or plant in their midst, so that he might come in contact with the dust of their feet (10.47.61). Entrance into the *lila*, then, is the supreme goal of life for the *Bhagavata* school, a goal considered to be unobtainable to all except God's highest and most intimate devotees. The text repeatedly tells us that he who is beyond the reach of the greatest of *yogis* is bound by the love of the residents of Braj (10.9.9), even to the point of being “controlled by them like a wooden puppet” (10.11.7).

A further term essential to a discussion of *lila* is *yogamaya*, the power of “divine illusion.” The unqualified term *maya*, in the *Bhagavata*, is generally

used in the same negative way that it is used in the *Gita* (7.14–15), and in Hindu thought in general, that is, to refer to the illusory power that keeps the *jiva* souls bewildered by the sense-objects of this world and ensnared in the *karmic* cycle of birth and death in *samsara* (10.23.52–53; 10.40.23). *Maya* has another face in the *Bhagavata*, however. This role of *maya* is especially discernible under the name *Yogamaya*, which occurs in the context of Krishna's *lila*. *Yogamaya* covers the pure liberated souls in the *lila* with her power of illusion, such that they are unaware of Krishna's real nature and thus relate to him not as God but rather as their friend, lover, or child, and so on. Were *Yogamaya* not to extend her influence in this way, the souls would realize Krishna's true nature and be incapable of interacting with him in *lila* in these intimate ways (10.7.32; 10.11.2 and following; 10.16.14; 10.19.14; 10.20.1; 10.42.22; 10.61.2). To put it differently, how could God truly play spontaneously and unceremoniously with anyone in the role of a son or friend, if everyone knew he was really God?

Unlike that of her *samsaric* counterpart, *Yogamaya*'s power of illusion, then, is a highly desirable and positive one obtained only by the highest yogis. Indeed, the text suggests that Krishna's incarnation has, in reality, two motives: one is the "official" motive articulated in the *Gita*, and opening verses of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata*, to unburden the earth from the intolerable buildup of demoniac military power and to thus protect the righteous (e.g., *Gita* 4.7–8; *Bhagavata* 10.1.17 and following). The other is to attract the souls lost in *samsara* to the beauty of *lila* with God, and thus entice them to relinquish their attachment for the self-centered indulgences in the world of *samsara*, which simply perpetuate the cycle of *karma*, and thus of repeated birth and death (11.16–17).

The *Bhagavata* vividly illustrates the essential role of *yogamaya* in the world of *lila* in the eighth chapter (of the tenth book), which is included in the following selections, when Krishna's mother, Yashoda, looks into her son's mouth to see if he has eaten dirt (10.8.36). Gazing at her child, she sees the entire universe in his mouth. Becoming enlightened as to the real nature of both herself and Krishna, she immediately loses her ability to interact with him as his mother and begins to bow down at his feet, spout Vedantic-type philosophy, and eulogize him. Krishna immediately re-covers her with his *yogamaya*, causing her to lose her memory of the event so that she can again place him on her lap and continue with her maternal duties. Krishna, in other words, doesn't want to be God all the time; he wants to enjoy *lila* with his friends as an equal, or with his parents as a subordinate. As the text puts it: "For those who could understand, Bhagavan Krishna manifested the condition of [submitting] Himself to the control of his dependents in this world" (10.11.9).

Being subject to the influence of *yogamaya* and hence able to play such intimate roles in God's *lila*, then, is the highest and rarest boon of human

existence. The text repeatedly says that not even the gods, or the most elevated personalities, or even Vishnu's eternal consort, the goddess of fortune herself, enjoy the grace bestowed on the residents of Braj (e.g., 10.9.20). Krishna's mother Yashoda was able to chase Krishna in anger, to spank him whom the greatest *yogis* of all cannot reach even in their minds (10.9.9). So elevated are the residents of Braj.

Krishna's *lila* extends beyond the actual acts performed by Krishna. Meditating upon his *lila* is a process of *yoga*, "union with the divine." Five of the seventeen verses where the term is used in book 10 as a proper noun (10.11.33; 10.35.1; 10.35.26; 10.47.54; 10.69.39) occur in the context of the residents of Braj singing about Krishna's *lila*. Hearing, singing about, and meditating upon Krishna's *lila* are the primary *yogic* activities in the *Bhagavata* school and, indeed, head up the list of the nine processes of *bhakti-yoga* outlined in book 7: hearing about Vishnu/Krishna, singing about him, remembering him, serving him, worshiping him, offering obeisances to him, dedicating all one's actions to him, confiding in him as a friend, and offering one's body and belongings to his service (7.5.23–24). The entire *Purana* is recited because king Parikshit, who had seven days to live, asked sage Shuka what a person at the point of death should hear, chant, and remember (1.19.38); the answer is the chanting of Krishna's names (2.1.11) and meditation upon his personal form (2.1.19). *Bhakti-yoga* involves saturating the senses with objects connected to Krishna's *lila*, and constantly filling the mind with thoughts of him. It is a process that transforms the focus of the mind and senses, rather than attempting to shut them down, as outlined in the classical *yoga* of Patanjali, and a saint is one whose mind and senses are used in this fashion (10.13.2). Singing and hearing about Krishna's *lila* with the senses of tongue and ear are two prime activities in this regard, and the residents of Braj are constantly and spontaneously engaged in this type of *bhakti-yoga*. According to the *Bhagavata*, although the present age of Kali-yuga is a "storehouse of faults," it has one major redeeming quality: simply by chanting about Krishna, one is freed from self-centered attachments and attains the highest destination (12.3.51). The same applies to hearing the stories about Krishna (11.6.48–49; 10.90.46; 10.6.44). Echoing the *Gita* (8.6–7), the *Bhagavata* says that anyone whose mind is absorbed in Krishna's feet is liberated from the material world at the time of death (10.2.37; 10.90.50), does not experience suffering while still within it (10.11.58; 10.39.37; 10.87.40; 10.90.49), and ultimately attains Krishna's abode (10.90.50).

This leads to another striking feature of the *yoga* of the *Bhagavata*: not only are Krishna's devotees awarded liberation, but so, too, are even his enemies—Putana, a devourer of children (10.6.35); the demon Agha (10.12.33) and various others (10.74.45; 10.78.9–10; 10.66.24; 10.87.23)—merely by dint of being absorbed in thoughts of Krishna, albeit in an inimical mood. Not surprisingly, if even those inimical to Krishna are involuntarily liberated

simply by coming into contact with him, irrespective of their motives, then anyone and everyone is eligible to voluntarily engage in the process of *bhakti-yoga* and attain the goal of selfless devotion, irrespective of caste, social status, race, or gender. Indeed, in accepting the lowly *gopis* as the highest of all *yogis*, including even all other *bhakti-yogis*, the *Bhagavata* significantly surpasses the *Gita*'s mere acceptance of women devotees as qualified for liberation (9.32), a statement that itself was radical for the times. (As an aside, it was these very *gopi* passages that incurred Victorian disapproval from certain quarters, and caused the *Bhagavata* to be disparaged by most Western scholars in the colonial period).

Before concluding, it is worthy of mention, if only in passing, that the final redactor of the *Bhagavata* is not only a philosopher or theologian but an epic poet; there are entire sections of the text, particularly the *panchadhyaya*, the five chapters of the tenth book dedicated to Krishna's amorous pastimes with the *gopis*, that exhibit all the characteristics of exquisite *kavya* poetry (e.g., as outlined in the literary text the *Sahityadarpana* 7.559). Overall, the tenth book of the *Bhagavata* ranks as an outstanding product of Sanskrit literature, a fact that has yet to receive the scholarly attention it merits. Perhaps more significantly, as this volume itself exemplifies, the *Bhagavata* has inspired more derivative literature, poetry, drama, dance, theater, and art than any other text in the history of Sanskrit literature, with the possible exception of the *Ramayana*.

Finally, as a text, the *Bhagavata* presents itself not just as a record of sacred history but as a literary substitute for Krishna after his departure from the world—the *vangamayavatara*, or literary incarnation of God. The concluding verse of the entire tenth book says that, by reading, hearing, and reciting the text itself, one is interacting directly with God (10.90.49–50). Likewise, the eleventh book, which concludes the narration of the Krishna story, ends with the same message in its final verse (11.31.28). The point is stressed still further by having the concluding verses of the entire *Purana* claim that those born after the departure of Krishna to his abode who are fortunate enough to encounter the *Bhagavata Purana*, listen to it, read it, and contemplate it constantly with a devoted heart will attain liberation, just as those who were fortunate enough to personally encounter Krishna when he was on earth were awarded liberation (12.13.18). The text thus presents itself as a fully empowered incarnation of Krishna for all future generations.

Be that as it may, the stories of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata* are well known and beloved to every Hindu household across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. They have inspired numerous spiritual seekers to renounce the world in quest of Krishna's lotus feet, countless more to engage in the process of *bhakti-yoga*, and generations of artists, dramatists, poets, singers, writers, dancers, architects, and temple-patrons across the centuries to represent their narratives. One need only consider the number of contributions in this volume that are predicated on its narratives to get a sense of

the significance of the tenth book on the religious landscape of Hinduism. The following selections attempt to capture the appeal of these stories by presenting some of the best known *lilas* from the text. (See Schweig, chapter 18 here, for a sample of the *gopi* passages.)

Chapter 3

Krishna's Birth

1. "In due course of time, an extremely auspicious moment endowed with all favorable qualities arrived. At the time of [Krishna's] birth, all the constellations and stars were benevolent. The constellation was Rohini, which is presided over by Brahma.
2. "The quarters were clear and the sky covered with clusters of visible stars. On the earth, there was an auspicious abundance of mines, pastures, villages, and towns.
3. "The rivers contained crystal-clear water and the ponds were beautiful with lotuses. Rows of trees offered eulogies with loud sounds of bees and birds.
4. "A fresh breeze blew in that region, pleasing the senses and carrying pleasant fragrances, and the sacred fires of the brahmins¹⁶ blazed forth, undisturbed.
5. "The minds of the ascetics and the gods were peaceful, and kettle drums resounded in unison at the time when the unborn One was born.
6. "The *kinntaras* and *gandharvas* burst into song, the *siddhas* and *charanas* offered prayers, and the *vidyadhavas* joyfully danced along with the *apsaras*.¹⁷
7. "The sages and demigods, overflowing with happiness, showered flowers, and the clouds rumbled very mildly in resonance with the ocean.
8. "At midnight, when deep darkness had arisen, Janardan¹⁸ Krishna, was born. Vishnu who dwells in the heart of everyone appeared in Devaki, who resembled a goddess, just as the full moon appears in the eastern quarter.
- 9–10. "Vasudeva saw that amazing, lotus-eyed child, with his four arms wielding the weapons of the conch and the mace, and so on.¹⁹ He bore the mark of *shrivatsa*, and the *kaustubha* jewel was radiant on his neck.²⁰ Clad in a yellow garment, he appeared as beautiful as a dark rain cloud. He was resplendent with a magnificent belt, and arm and wrist bracelets, and his profuse locks were encircled with the luster of a helmet and earrings made of valuable *vaidurya* gems.
11. "Upon seeing his son, Hari, Vasudeva was overwhelmed by the auspicious occasion of Krishna's incarnation. His eyes were wide

with amazement. Overcome with joy, he bestowed ten thousand cows on the brahmins.

12. “Vasudeva understood that this was the Supreme Being who was illuminating the birth chamber with his effulgence, O Parikshit, descendent of Brahma. Realizing his majesty, Vasudeva’s fear was dispelled. He eulogized Krishna with body bowed, hands joined in supplication, and mind fixed.”

13. Vasudeva said: “It is clear that you are Bhagavan, God himself, the supreme Being beyond the material world. You are the witness of the minds of everyone. Your form is pure bliss and majesty.”²¹

14. It was you, in the beginning, who created this world comprised of the three *guna* qualities out of your own nature. Then, although not actually entering into it, you nonetheless make it seem that you have entered it.”

Chapter 6

Putana’s Arrival in Braj

2. The dreadful Putana, slaughterer of children, had been dispatched by Kamsa, and was roaming around devouring infants in towns, villages, and pasturing grounds.

4. Putana roamed around freely and was capable of flying. One day, after transforming herself into a woman by her own mystic power, she flew to Nanda’s Gokula [Braj] and entered it.

7. Then, with her mind intent on infants, that abductor of children came by chance upon the house of Nanda, and saw the child, who is the exterminator of the wicked, on the bed. His vast powers were concealed, just as fire is concealed in ash.

8. Knowing her to be a compulsive slaughterer of children, Krishna, the Soul of all moving and nonmoving beings, closed his eyes. She lifted the unlimited Lord, who was to be her destruction, on her lap, just as a fool lifts a sleeping serpent thinking it to be a rope.

9. The two mothers, overcome by her influence, saw that this distinguished woman was inside, and stood watching her. Like a sword covered in a sheath, she had a heart that was razor-edged—but she took great steps to appear exactly the opposite.

10. The dreadful ogress placed Krishna on her lap in that place, and gave the infant her breast, covered with deadly poison. Squeezing it tightly with both hands, the furious Lord sucked it along with her life breath.

11. Pressured on all her vital parts, her body drenched in sweat, writhing in convulsions, and thrashing her eyes, legs, and arms about incessantly, Putana cried out, uttering: “Stop! Release me, release me.”

12. The earth with its mountains, and space with its planets trembled at that forceful resounding sound. The netherworlds and all the quarters²² reverberated. People fell to the ground fearing that thunderbolts were falling.
13. Being tormented at her breast in this way, that roamer of the night assumed her original form, O King. Opening her gaping mouth wide, she toppled down just like Vritra struck by the thunderbolt.²³ Her hair, legs, and arms splayed out over the pasturing grounds.
14. Even while falling, that body pulverized the trees within a twelve-mile radius, O King. It was a wondrous thing.
- 15–17. The *gopis* and *gopas*, whose heads, ears, and hearts had just been shattered by that sound, were petrified on seeing that terrifying body with its reddish hair scattered. Its mouth had fearsome teeth the size of ploughs, nostrils like mountain caves, breasts like hillocks, eyes like deep dark wells, a hideous waist like a sand bank, feet, thighs, and arms like embankments, and a belly like a waterless lake.
18. The *gopis* were panic-stricken, seeing the child playing completely fearlessly on her bosom; they hastily rushed forward and snatched Him up.

Chapter 8

The Vision of the Universal Form

21. After a short period of time had passed, Balarama²⁴ and Keshava Krishna roamed about Braj, crawling around on their hands and knees.
22. The two of them crawled around in the dust of Braj like snakes, dragging along their legs, which emitted charming sounds and tinkles [from their anklets]. Their minds were delighted by that sound, and so they followed people, but then scurried back to their mothers as if frightened and confused.
23. Their two mothers, whose breasts were lactating from affection, picked their two boys up into their arms. The boys looked charming with the mud smeared on their bodies. After offering their breasts and gazing at their faces with their tiny teeth as they suckled, the mothers entered into a blissful state.
24. When their childhood *lila*²⁵ became worth watching by the women, the ladies of Braj would leave their households and enjoy themselves watching and laughing as those two were dragged hither and thither by the calves whose tails they had grasped.
25. The two boys were highly mobile and their play [sometimes] occurred out of bounds. Whenever their mothers could not safeguard their sons from horned or fanged animals, fire, swords, water,

winged creatures, and thorns, or even perform their household duties, they experienced considerable agitation of mind.

26. After a short time, O kingly sage, Balarama and Krishna were walking easily in Gokula on their feet without bruised knees.

27. Thereafter, Bhagavan Krishna, along with Balarama, played with the boys of Braj of his same age, awakening the bliss of the women of Braj.

28. Observing the delightful childish restlessness of Krishna, the *gopis* assembled together and spoke tongue-in-cheek as follows [in the presence] of his mother, who was listening:

29. “Sometimes, he releases the calves untimely, and laughs when cries [of protest] are raised. Moreover, he eats the tasty milk and whey stolen by means of his thieving strategies. He divides [the curds and whey] and feeds the monkeys. If he does not eat, he breaks the pot. When goods are not available and he leaves angry with the household, he blames the children.

30. “When it is out of reach of his hands, he devises a system [to obtain it] by arranging benches and grinding mortars. Knowing what has been placed inside the pots hanging on rope slings, that cunning boy [makes] a hole [in them] during that time of day when the *gopis* are very absorbed in household chores. His own body, which bears clusters of precious jewels, functions as a light in the dark house.

31. “While he is perpetuating such audacities, he passes urine and other things in our houses. Although his deeds are accomplished by means of thieving strategies, he outwardly appears as if virtuous.” In this manner, these affairs were related by the women as they gazed at Krishna’s beautiful face with its fearful eyes. With a smiling countenance, Yashoda did not want to scold Krishna.

32. Once, when Balarama and the other cowherd boys were playing, they complained to Mother Yashoda: “Krishna has eaten mud.”

33. Yashoda was concerned for his welfare, and so scolded Krishna, whose eyes appeared to be struck by fear. Grasping him in her hand, she said to him:

34 “Why have you eaten mud secretly, you unrestrained boy? These young friends of yours are making this allegation, and so is your elder brother.”

35. “Mother, I didn’t eat any mud. They are all spreading false accusations. If you think they are speaking the truth, then look into my mouth yourself.”

36. “If that is the case, then open wide,” she said. Lord Hari, Krishna, whose supremacy cannot be constrained, but who is God assuming the form of a human boy for play, opened wide.

37–38. Yashoda saw there the universe of moving and nonmoving things; space; the cardinal directions; the sphere of the earth with its oceans, islands, and mountains; air and fire; the moon and the stars. She saw the circle of the constellations, water, light, the wind, the sky, the evolved senses, the mind, the elements, and the three *guna* qualities.²⁶

39. She saw this universe, with all of its variety, differentiated into bodies, which are the repositories of souls. She saw time, Nature, and *karma*. Seeing Braj as well as herself in the gaping mouth in the body of her son, she was struck with bewilderment:

40. “Is this actually a dream? Is it a supernatural illusion, or is it just the bewilderment of my own intelligence? Or is it, in fact, some inherent divine power of this child of mine?”

41. “Therefore, I offer homage to his feet, which are the support of this world. From them, and through their agency, this world manifests. Their true nature cannot be known by the senses nor by reason. They are very difficult to perceive by thought, words, deeds, or intellect.

42. “He is my refuge. Through his illusory power arise ignorant notions such as: ‘I am I; he over there is my husband; this is my son, I am the virtuous wife, protectress of all the wealth of the ruler of Braj; all the *gopis* and *gopas*, along with the wealth derived from the cattle, are mine.’”

43. Then the omnipotent supreme Lord cast his *yogamaya* power of illusion in the form of maternal affection over the *gopi* who had realized the truth.

44. Immediately, the *gopi*’s memory was erased. She sat her son up on her lap and returned to her previous state of mind, with her heart full of intense love.

45. She considered Hari, Krishna, whose glories are sung by the three *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, *Samkhya yoga* and the *satvata* sages,²⁷ to be her very own son.

Chapter Nine

Krishna’s Favor Falls on the *Gopi Yashoda*

1. Once upon a time, when the house servants were engaged in other chores, Yashoda, the wife of Nanda, churned the milk herself.

2. Remembering the songs about the activities of her child, she sang them while she was churning yogurt.

3. Yashoda churned, revolving back and forth. Her bracelets were moving on her arms, which were tired from pulling the rope, and her earrings were swaying. *Malati* jasmine flowers dropped from her hair, and her face, with its beautiful eyebrows, was sweating. She

wore a linen cloth bound by a girdle on her broad sloping hips, and her two quivering breasts lactated due to affection for her son.

4. Hari, Krishna, approached his mother as she was churning, desiring to drink her breast milk. Grasping the stirring stick, he obstructed her, invoking her love.

5. He climbed on her lap. Looking at his smiling face, she allowed him to drink from her breast, which was lactating from affection. But she hastily put him down, while he was still unsatisfied, and rushed off when the milk that had been on the fire, boiled over.

6. Enraged and biting his quivering red lower lip with his teeth, Krishna broke the butter churning pot with a stone. With phony tears in his eyes he went inside to a hiding place, and ate the freshly churned butter.

7. Yashoda removed the boiling milk and reentered again. Noticing the broken vessel, she inspected that deed of her son. Not seeing him present, she laughed.

8. She spied him standing on top of the base of a mortar. He was wantonly distributing fresh butter to a monkey from a hanging pot, his eyes anxious on account of his thievery. She stealthily approached her son from behind.

9. Seeing her with stick in hand, Krishna hastily climbed down from there and fled, as if in fear. The *gopi* ran after him, whom the minds of *yogis*, directed by the power of austerity, are not able to reach.

10. The slender-waisted mother pursued Krishna, her progress impeded by the burden of her broad moving hips. Followed by a retinue of flowers fallen from her braid that had become loosened from haste, she seized him.

11. Grasping his arm she chastised him, making him fearful. Looking up with eyes agitated with fright, the guilty boy was crying and rubbing his two eyes, smearing the mascara with his hands.

12. Yashoda was affectionate to her child, and so threw away the stick upon realizing that her son was frightened. Unaware of the power of her son, she wanted to bind him with a rope.

13. Krishna has no beginning and end, no inside and no outside. He is the beginning and end and inside and outside of the universe. He is the universe.

14. The *gopi* bound him with a rope to the mortar as if he were a common being. She considered Krishna, who is the unmanifest Truth beyond sense perception in the form of a human, to be her own son.

15. That rope for binding her guilty child was short by two fingers. So the *gopi* joined another one together with the first.

16. When even that also was too short, she joined another one with that, but however many ropes she brought forth, they were also two fingers lacking.
17. In this way, while all the *gopis* chuckled with amusement, Ya-shoda joined together all the ropes in her household. Smiling, she was struck with wonder.
18. Seeing the exertion of his mother whose limbs were sweating, and whose wreath of flowers had fallen from her hair, Krishna became compliant in his own binding.
19. Indeed, by this act, dear Parikshit, the quality of subservience to a devotee was demonstrated by Hari, Krishna, despite the fact that his only constraint is self-induced. By him this universe, along with those who control it, is controlled.
20. Neither Brahma, nor Shiva, nor even Shri, the goddess of fortune, despite being united with his body, obtained the benediction that the *gopi* obtained from Krishna, the giver of liberation.
21. God, this son of the *gopi*, is not attained as easily in this world by embodied beings, nor by the wise, nor by the knowers of the self, as he is by those who have devotion.

Chapter 12

Playing in Braj (The Killing of the Demon Agha)

1. One day, Hari, Krishna, made up his mind to have breakfast in the forest. After arising at dawn and waking up his *gopa* friends with the pleasant sound of his horn, he set forth, herding the calves in front.
2. Thousands of adorable boys, equipped with flutes, bugle horns, staffs, and slings, joined him. Placing ahead their respective calves, which accompanied them in the thousands, they merrily set out.
3. Combining their own calves with the unlimited calves of Krishna, the cowherd boys diverted themselves in *lila* while they grazed their cows here and there.
4. Although they were decorated with gold, jewels, *gunja* berries, and crystals, they adorned themselves with minerals, peacock feathers, bunches of flowers, young shoots, and fruits.
5. They stole each others slings and other things and, when detected, they threw them to some distant spot. Those who were in that spot then threw them further still. Eventually they returned them, laughing.
6. If Krishna went off in the distance to view the beauty of the forest, they would enjoy themselves by touching him, saying "I was first, I was first!"
7. Some played their flutes, some blew their horns. Others hummed with the bees and still others cooed with the cuckoos.

8. They chased the shadowless birds, moved gracefully with the swans, seated themselves with the cranes, and danced with the peacocks.
9. Tugging at the young monkeys, they climbed the trees with them. Then, imitating them, they joined them in swinging through the trees.
10. Jumping about with the frogs, they got soaked by the splashes from the river. They laughed at their own shadows and hurled abuse at their echoes.
11. In this way, those boys who had accumulated heaps of merit roamed about in pleasure with Krishna.²⁸ He is the experience of the bliss of *Brahman* for the wise, the supreme Deity for those who are dedicated to his service, and the child of a human being for those who are absorbed in ignorance.
12. Although the dust of His feet is not obtained even after many births of austerities by *yogis* with controlled minds, He has personally become an object of vision for the residents of Braj. How, then, can their fortune be described?

Chapter 16

The Banishment of Kaliya

17. Searching for their beloved Krishna along the path by means of his footprints, which were marked with the signs of God,²⁹ the cowherd folk went to the banks of the Yamuna.
18. Seeing the footsteps of the Lord of their community interspersed here and there among the other footprints of the cows on the path, O King, they rushed along in haste. These footprints bore the marks of the flag, thunderbolt, goad, barley, and lotus.
19. Seeing Krishna motionless within that reservoir of water in the distance and enveloped in the coils of the serpent within the lake, and seeing the cows and cowherd men traumatized everywhere, the cowherd folk were struck with utter despair and cried out in distress.
20. The *gopis*' minds were attached to the unlimited Lord. Remembering his affectionate smiles, glances, and words, they were overcome with the utmost grief as their beloved was being seized by the serpent. They perceived the three worlds as void without their dearest.³⁰
21. They prevented Krishna's mother from following her child [into the lake], although they were as distressed as she. Pouring forth their sorrow, and narrating stories about the darling of Braj, each one remained corpse-like, with their gaze fixed on the face of Krishna.

22. Lord Balarama was aware of the potency of Krishna. Seeing Nanda and the others, whose very life was Krishna, entering that lake, he restrained them.

23. Krishna remained for some time imitating the behavior of a human being in this manner. Then, seeing that His own Gokula community, including women and children, that had no shelter other than him, was completely distressed, he understood that this was on account of him and arose up from the bonds of the serpent.

24. The serpent, his coils tormented by the extended body of Krishna, released him. Enraged, the serpent raised up his hoods and drew himself erect as he looked at the Lord. His face had motionless eyes like burning charcoal, and his nostrils were breathing like frying pans of poison.

25. Krishna circled around him, toying with him. Just like Garuda, the king of birds,³¹ Krishna likewise maneuvered around looking for His opportunity. The serpent had eyes fiery with dreadful poison and was repeatedly licking the two corners of his mouth with his forked tongue.

26. Bending the raised neck of the serpent, whose strength had been depleted by this circling around, Krishna, the Original Being, climbed onto its massive hoods. Then, that original teacher of all art forms danced, his lotus feet reddened by contact with the piles of jewels on the serpent's head.³²

27. Then, his followers—the celestial *gandharvas*, *siddhas*, sages, *charanas*, and young wives of the gods—seeing that Krishna had begun to dance, immediately approached in delight with eulogies, offerings, flowers, songs, musical instruments, and various types of drums such as *mridangas*, *panavas*, and *anakas*.

28. Krishna, who chastises the wicked, crushed whichever head of that hundred-and-one-headed snake would not bend, with blows of his feet, O King. The snake's life span became depleted and he was whirling around. He vomited blood profusely from his nose and mouth and was overcome by utter desperation.

29. The serpent was breathing intensely out of anger and was discharging poison from his eyes. Whichever head he raised up, Krishna forced him to bow low, striking it with his feet as he danced. As he was being worshiped with flowers, that most ancient Being brought the snake under submission in the lake.

30. The serpent, his limbs broken, and his one thousand hoods battered by that wondrous dancing, was spewing out blood from his mouths, O King. He remembered that most ancient being, Narayana,³³ the teacher of all moving and nonmoving entities, and surrendered to him in his mind.

Chapter 25

Krishna Lifts Govardhan Hill

1. Shri Shuka said: "At this, O King, Indra understood that his own worship had been abandoned, and became enraged with the *gopas*, headed by Nanda, who had accepted Krishna as their Lord.
2. "Thinking himself to be Lord, Indra summoned the host of clouds called Samvartaka, which bring about the annihilation of the universe.³⁴ Furious, he spoke the following words:
3. "'Just see the extent of the intoxication of the forest-dwelling *gopas* produced because of their wealth. They have taken refuge in Krishna, a mortal, and now they neglect the gods.
4. "'Abandoning meditative knowledge, they desire to cross over the ocean of material existence through ritualistic so-called sacrifices that are like unstable boats.
5. "'By taking shelter of Krishna, a boastful, childish, stubborn, ignorant mortal who thinks himself to be a great scholar, the *gopas* have made an enemy out of me.
6. "'Destroy the arrogance of these people caused by the intoxication of riches. They are steeped in wealth and their egos have been inflated by Krishna. Bring destruction to their livestock.
7. "'As for me, I will mount my elephant Airavata,³⁵ and follow you to Braj accompanied by the immensely powerful host of Maruts,³⁶ with the intention of destroying the cattle station of Nanda.'"
8. Shri Shuka said: "Ordered in this way by Indra, the clouds, unleashed from their moorings, vigorously released torrents of rain on Nanda's Gokula.
9. "Flashing forth with lightening bolts and roaring with claps of thunder, they showered down hail as they were urged on by the fierce hosts of Maruts.
10. "When the clouds had released incessant torrents of rain as thick as pillars, the earth became inundated with floods of water. Low ground could not be distinguished from high ground.
11. "The livestock, shivering because of the excessive wind and rain, and the *gopas* and *gopis*, afflicted by cold, approached Krishna for protection.
12. "Covering their heads and shielding their children with their bodies, shivering and tormented by the rain, they approached the soles of the feet of the Lord:
13. "'Krishna, most virtuous Krishna, Master—you are compassionate to your devotees. Please protect Gokula, which accepts you as Lord, from the wrath of this divinity.'

14. “Seeing them being pounded unconscious by the excessive wind and hail, Lord Hari deliberated on what the incensed Indra had done:

15. “‘Indra unleashes rain full of hail and unseasonal and excessive fierce wind in order to destroy us because we neglected his offering.

16. “‘Under these circumstances, I will adopt the appropriate counter-measures through my mystic power. I will destroy the ignorance and pride born of opulence of those who, out of stupidity, think of themselves as lords of the world.

17. “‘The bewilderment caused by thinking of oneself as lord is inappropriate for the demigods who are endowed with a godly nature. My breaking the pride of the impure for their peace of mind is a suitable thing to do.

18. “‘Therefore, I make this pledge: I shall bring about the protection of the cowherd community by my own mystic power. They accept me as their Lord, their shelter is in me, and they are my family.’

19. “Saying this, Vishnu lifted up the mountain of Govardhan with one hand and held it effortlessly just like a child holds a mushroom.

20. “Then the Lord spoke to the cowherds: ‘Mother, father, and residents of Braj, enter the cavity under the mountain along with your herds of cows at your leisure.

21. “‘Please do not entertain any fear that the mountain might fall from my hand during this time. Enough of your fear of the rain and wind! I have arranged shelter from them for you.’

22. “At this, their minds were pacified by Krishna, and they entered the cavity with their wealth, herds, and dependents in accordance with the available space.

23. “Giving up concern for hunger and thirst, and any expectation of comfort, Krishna held up the mountain for seven days. Watched by those residents of Braj, he did not move from that spot.

24. “Subdued and helpless, and with his plan thwarted, Indra reigned in his clouds. He was completely astonished by Krishna’s mystic power.

25. “When he saw that the sky was cloudless, the fierce rain and wind had desisted, and the sun had arisen, Krishna, the lifter of Govardhan hill, spoke to the *gopas*:

26. “‘Give up your fear, O *gopas*, and come out with your wives, possessions, and children. The wind and rain have desisted, and the rivers are for the most part without [flood] water.’

27. “At this, those *gopas*, women, children, and elders took their respective cows and their paraphernalia, which had been loaded onto carts, and gradually came out.

28. "While all beings watched, Bhagavan, the Lord, effortlessly placed that hill back in its place where it had been previously.
29. "The residents of Braj were filled with the force of love, and approached him with embraces, or with whatever was appropriate. And the *gopis* happily offered auspicious benedictions, and lovingly worshiped him with yogurt, unhusked barley, and so on.
30. "Overwhelmed with love, Yashoda, Rohini, Nanda, and Balarama, best of the strong, embraced Krishna and offered benedictions.
31. "The hosts of gods, the *siddhas*, *sadhya*s, *gandharvas*, and *charanas* in the heavens praised Krishna with satisfaction, and released showers of flowers, O Parikshit, descendent of Prithu.
32. "Directed by the gods, they played conches and kettledrums in the celestial realms, while the leaders of the *gandharvas*, headed by Tumburu, sang.
33. "Then, O King, Hari, along with Balarama, proceeded to his own cow-pen surrounded by the affectionate cow herders. The *gopis* happily went on their way singing about his deeds of this kind. Their hearts were touched."

The following narrative represents the adult Krishna after he has left the forests of Braj and set about his mission of reestablishing *dharma*.

Chapter 69

The Vision of Krishna's Householder Life

1. Shri Shuka said: "After hearing that Naraka had been killed, and that there had been a marriage of many women by one person, Krishna, Narada desired to see this:
2. "'It is really amazing that one person with one body has married sixteen thousand women, and lives simultaneously in many houses.'
3. "Saying this, the eager sage of the gods came to see Dvaraka. It resounded with swarms of bees and flocks of birds, and had flowery parks and pleasure groves.
4. "It was filled with the loud sounds of swans and cranes in lakes filled with blooming *kumuda* white lotuses, *kahlara* white lotuses, *ambhoja* lotuses, *indivara* blue lotuses, and water lilies.
5. "It was endowed with nine hundred thousand mansions made of silver and crystal with external appendages of gold and jewels, and was distinctive with great emeralds.
6. "It was charming with residences of gods, assembly halls and buildings, and laid-out markets, crossroads, paths, and throughways. Its terraces, streets, courtyards, and roads were sprinkled with water, and the heat was blocked by flying flags and banners.

7. "Hari's private inner chambers were in that city; they were beautiful, venerated by the celestial guardians of the quarters of the world, and exhibited the personal skill of Tvashta, the architect of the gods.
8. "Those chambers were beautifully decorated with sixteen thousand residences. Narada entered one of these magnificent houses of [Krishna's] wives.
- 9-II. "It was supported with coral pillars with choicest overlays of *vaidurya* gems, and decorated with walls made of sapphire, and floors whose luster never faded. There were canopies constructed by Tvashta, with hanging strings of pearls, and ivory seats and couches embellished with the best quality jewels. There were women dressed in beautiful garments with golden ornaments on their necks, and men wearing jeweled earrings, turbans, fine clothes, and armor.
12. "The darkness was dispelled by the light of clusters of jeweled lamps, O dear king. Peacocks danced there on the variegated pinnacles of the houses. Seeing the incense and *aguru* billowing forth from the holes [in the latticed windows], dear Parikshit, they thought them to be clouds and cried out.³⁷
13. "The sage saw the Lord of the Satvatas with His wife in that house. She was always accompanied by a thousand maidservants who were equal in dress, age, beauty, and qualities, and she was fanning Krishna with an ox-tail fan with a golden handle.
14. "Bhagavan Krishna, the most eminent of those who uphold *dharma*, saw Narada and immediately rose up from the bed of Shri, the goddess of fortune. He offered homage to both Narada's feet with his head, which was bedecked with a helmet. Then, with his hands folded in respect, he insisted that [Narada] sit on his own personal seat.
15. "Although he is the ultimate *guru* of the world, and the water that washes his feet [the Ganga] is the ultimate holy place, Krishna, the Lord of the righteous, washed Narada's feet and actually carried the water from that on His own head. Brahmanyadeva, 'the Lord of Brahmins,' is the name applied to him for this quality.
16. "After worshiping the most eminent of the celestial sages according to scriptural injunctions, Krishna, the ancient sage Narayana, friend of mankind, spoke measured words as sweet as nectar: 'Pray tell, master, what can we do for your good self?'
17. "Shri Narada said: 'O almighty one, it is certainly not surprising that you, the master of all the worlds, are the friend of all creatures, and the chastiser of the wicked. You are widely praised, and we know well that your incarnation is due to your own free will. It is for the protection and maintenance of the world, and for [bestowing] liberation.

18. "I have seen your two lotus feet that give liberation to people. Brahma and the other [gods] of profound intelligence meditate upon them in the heart. They are the grounds of deliverance for those fallen into the well of *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death. Bless me that my remembrance [of them] will remain, so that I can travel about meditating [on them]."
19. "Thereafter, Narada entered another residence of Krishna's wives, O dear king, desiring to witness the *yogamaya* of the Lord of the lords of *yoga*."
20. "There, he [saw] Krishna again, this time playing with dice with his beloved and with Uddhava. Narada was worshiped with the highest devotion, by [Krishna's] rising up to greet him and [offering] him a seat, etc."
21. "Narada was asked by Krishna, who appeared as if unaware: 'When did you arrive, sir? What can we, who are imperfect, do for those who are perfect?'"
22. "'Therefore please tell us, O Brahmin, make this birth auspicious for us.' Narada was amazed. He rose silently and went to another residence."
23. "There, too, he also saw Govinda, Krishna, who was pampering his children and infants. Then, in another residence, Narada saw that preparations had been made for taking a bath."
24. "Elsewhere, Krishna was offering oblations into the three sacred fires,³⁸ worshipping with the five sacrifices,³⁹ feeding the twice-born, and eating their remnants."⁴⁰
25. "In another place, Krishna was sitting down at dusk and silently chanting *japa mantras*.⁴¹ In one place he was maneuvering around in the fencing area with sword and shield."
26. "Elsewhere, Krishna, the elder brother of Gada, was riding horses, elephants, and chariots, and somewhere else again, he was lying on a couch, being praised by bards."
27. "In one place, Krishna was consulting with his ministers such as Uddhava, while elsewhere he was enjoying water sports surrounded by women and courtesans."
28. "In another place he was giving nicely decorated cows to distinguished members of the twice-born castes, and listening to auspicious stories from the *Puranas* and epic histories."
29. "At some point, in some other house of a beloved, Krishna was laughing by telling jokes, while elsewhere he was pursuing *dharma*, *artha*, 'economic prosperity,' or *kama*, 'sensual enjoyment.'⁴²
30. "In one place he was meditating on the supreme Being who is beyond *prakriti*, and serving his *gurus* with pleasures, desirable objects, and worship."

31. "And somewhere else, Keshava Krishna was preparing for war against some people, and elsewhere again, alliances with others. Still elsewhere, Krishna was contemplating the welfare of the righteous, along with Balarama.
32. "[Narada saw] him making arrangements with due pomp for traditional marriages for his sons and daughters, with suitable brides and grooms at the appropriate time.
33. "He saw great celebrations by the Lord of the lords of *yoga* for his children when they were sent off, and when they returned. The people were amazed at these.
34. "In some places, [Narada saw] Krishna offering sacrifices to all the gods with elaborate rituals, or fulfilling his *dharma* by [constructing] monasteries, groves, and wells.
35. "In other places, he was roaming about in the hunt, mounted on a horse from the Sindh province, and killing sacrificial animals, surrounded by the Yadu heroes.
36. "Elsewhere, the Lord of *yogis* was wondering about in disguise among his ministers in the inner section of the city, desiring to know the attitudes of each of them.
37. "After seeing this exhibition of *yogamaya* by Krishna, who was following human ways, Narada said to Hrishikesh Krishna smilingly:
38. "'We know that your *yogamaya* is hard to perceive, even for magicians. But it will manifest, O Soul of the lords of *yoga*, by service to your lotus feet.
39. "'Give me your leave, O God—I will wonder about the worlds, which are overflowing with your glories, singing about your *lilas*, which purify the earth.'"

NOTES

1. The material for this section is drawn from my translation of the tenth book, *Krishna: the Beautiful Legend of God: Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book 10* (London: Penguin, 2004).
2. Madhva, in the thirteenth century, refers to commentaries that are not presently available, as does Jiva Gosvamin in the sixteenth century.
3. Wilson's translation of the *Vishnu Purana* (Delhi: Nag, reprint 1980), also appeared in 1840.
4. The actual number is 16,256.
5. "That which is heard," or transhuman revelation not composed by humans, namely, the early Vedic corpus.
6. "That which is remembered," or indirect revelation, divine in origin, but composed via human agency, namely, most other pan-Indic classical texts later than the Vedic corpus.

7. Many of the Vedic hymns assume common knowledge of bygone persons and events to which they briefly allude and that would have been remembered through tradition, and some of these are also mentioned in the *Puranas*. As early as the *Atharvaveda* of around 1000 B.C.E., there is a reference to “the *Purana*” (5.19.9), and there are numerous references in the Vedic texts thereafter.

8. This time bracket is partly predicated on the fact that neither the later dynasties nor later famous rulers, such as Harsha in the seventh century C.E., occur in the king lists contained in the texts.

9. Edwin Bryant. 2002. “The Date and Provenance of the *Bhagavata Purana*” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 11.1, 51–80.

10. The word *amsha* is the crucial term here. It is primarily used in connection with Vishnu and Krishna, and means “portion” or “partial incarnation.” The sense is that the supreme deity can maintain his own presence, while simultaneously manifesting some aspect of himself elsewhere in a separate and distinct presence (or any number of presences). That secondary, or derivative, manifestation which exhibits a part but not the full characteristics or potency of the source Being is known as an *amsha*. The term *kala* has similar connotations. Verse 1.3.28 identifies all other incarnations as *amshas* or *kalas* but sets Krishna apart as Bhagavan himself, which is taken by the Krishna sects to indicate that he is the original Being and source of the other incarnations.

11. The Vedanta school concerned itself with the relationship between *Brahman*, the supreme Truth of the Upanishads; *atman*, the soul or individualized feature of *Brahman*; and the perceived world as a whole.

12. The Samkhya school posited a dualistic metaphysical system in which the created world evolved out of one primordial matter, *prakriti*, from within which the *purusha*, “soul,” must extricate itself.

13. Classical *yoga* is less a philosophical school than a practical psychosomatic technique through which the *purusha* soul can realize itself, as distinct from *prakriti*.

14. Specifically, Krishna’s form is described in several places as made of pure *sattva*, lucidity (10.2.29; 10.2.35; 10.84.18; 10.88.18), here a synonym of *Brahman*.

15. See, in this regard: 11.31.6; 10.28.14–17; 12.24.14; 14.12.26; 14.24.29; 10.12.26; 1.25.22; 2.9.9; 2.2.18; 4.9.29; 10.88.25–26; 7.1.34; 10.46.32; 3.15.14–25.

16. There are four castes in the Hindu social system. The brahmins are the scholarly and priestly class.

17. These are all different types of celestial beings, most of whom are renowned for their singing, music, and dancing.

18. Janardan is a name of Krishna meaning “inciting men.”

19. Krishna is here exhibiting his form of Vishnu. This has four arms, which bear a conch, lotus, club, and discus.

20. *Shrivatsa* is a tuft of hair on Vishnu’s chest. The *kaustubha* jewel was obtained after the ocean of milk was churned by the gods and the demons. Both are characteristic of Vishnu/Krishna.

21. The *Bhagavata* states that the body of God is not made from *prakriti*, or matter, but from *Brahman*. The ingredients of *Brahman*, from at least the time of the Upanishads, are said to be *sat*, *cit* and *ananda*: being consciousness and bliss.

22. In actual fact, there are ten quarters, or directions, in Hindu cosmography: eight cardinal points (N, S, E, W, NE, NW, SE, SW), and the up and down directions.

23. This is a reference to the famous Rigvedic story wherein Indra battles the serpent Vritra and kills him with his thunderbolt.

24. Balarama is Krishna's brother.

25. *Lila*, as noted, is the word used to refer to the sports or pastimes of Krishna when he incarnates into the world. The term conveys an understanding that anything Krishna does is determined by his own will, and for his own pleasure. It is not subject to the restrictions, control, or expectations of the laws, norms, and influences of this world (such as *maya*, *dharma*, *karma*, and *samsara*, etc.).

26. The senses, as well as the mind, intelligence, and ego and the elements of matter—earth, water, fire, air, ether—all evolve from primordial matter, *prakriti*—as a result of the churning of the three *gunas*.

27. The *Vedas* are the oldest Indo-Aryan texts and are primarily hymns used in the sacrificial cult; Samkhya Yoga, is one of the six classical schools of Hindu philosophy; the *Upanishads* are the ancient philosophical texts of the late Vedic period.

28. The merit to be able to take birth at the time of Krishna's incarnation and participate in his *lila* pastimes is understood as being the highest attainment of human life in the Vaishnava *bhakti* schools. Such merit would have been accumulated throughout many past lives.

29. Incarnations of God can be recognized by certain bodily characteristics. These include markings on the soles of the feet as described in the next verse.

30. In Hindu cosmography, there are upper, middle, and lower realms in the universe.

31. Garuda, the carrier of Vishnu, is a huge eagle.

32. Certain serpents, such as the celestial *nagas*, have jewels in their hoods.

33. Narayana is another name for Vishnu among Vaishnavas.

34. The universe undergoes partial as well as complete annihilation at the end of various cycles of time before being recreated anew. At these terminal points of the cycle, the universe is inundated with water from rain clouds.

35. Airavata, a white elephant produced when the gods and demons churned the ocean of milk, is Indra's carrier.

36. Indra, as the god of rain, is often accompanied by the Maruts, who are storm gods.

37. Peacocks always cry before rain. This verse exemplifies the *alankara*, poetic convention, known as *bhrantiman*, "the mistaken," when something is perceived as being something other than what it is.

38. The standard form of sacrifice included three sacred fires: the *dakshinagni*, "southern fire," of semicircular shape, situated on the southern side of the ritual enclosure, which protected the ritual from malignant influences; the *garhapatya*, "domestic altar," of circular shape situated on the western side of the ritual enclosure, upon which the domestic fire is installed and in which the oblations are cooked; and the *ahavaniya*, the square offering altar situated on the eastern side of the ritual enclosure, upon which the offering fire is installed and in which the oblations are offered.

39. According to the *Laws of Manu* (3.69–71), the *mahayajna*, “great sacrifice,” consists of five offerings, to Brahma, the gods, the forefathers, humans, and ghosts.

40. As noted earlier, eating the remnants of food offered to the deity or to saintly persons is called *prasada*, and is considered purifying.

41. *Japa* is meditation upon the repetition of the name of a deity.

42. The fulfillment of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*, along with *moksha*, liberation, are the four *purusharthas*, or goals of human life.

1
Formed of a living god, Himālaya, supreme
Raja of the Mountains, rises in the north
and bathing in the western and the eastern oceans
stretches out like a rod that could measure the earth.

2
All the mountains chose him to be the calf
for drawing the Earth's love when, commanded by Pṛthu,
with Mount Meru, because of his skill, doing their milking,
she gave them great healing herbs and radiant jewels.

3
Source of unending treasures, none of his splendour
is lessened at all by the snow. A single
blemish will vanish under a mass of virtues,
as the line across the moon is lost in rays of light.

4
He carries a red richness of minerals on his peaks,
with colours reflected and scattered through swirls of clouds
like sunsets free of time, a mine of ornaments
for the movements in love of Apsaras in divine worlds.

5

Leaving the shade of clouds that circle the lower ridges, their leisure whipped away from them by sudden showers of rain, the Siddha saints of miracles rest under sun on his summits.

6

Though the prints marked out in blood are washed away by the melting snow, mountain hunters still can follow the tracks of lions who have struck down elephants through the pearls that fall from hollows between claws.

7

The beautiful women of the race of Vidyādhara, for writing their messages of love, use red minerals on bark peeled from birches, and the letters look like spots on the skins of ageing elephants.

8

He blows into the hollows of bamboos with the wind rising up from the mouths of his caves as if he were sending that sound out as a drone note for demigod Kinnara musicians to build on when they sing.

9

Elephants, trying to rub away the itch of rut from their temples, have opened flows of milky juice on the cedar trees and the fragrance makes the ridges smell sweet.

10
Men and women of the mountain forests
live in caves that are spread with glowing herbs
lighting their nights of love without ever
any need to rise and fill such lamps with oil.

11
Even on trails where the snow has frozen hard as stone
and bites at their feet, the Kinnara women
pass with their same slow pace, balancing
the graceful weight of their heavy hips and breasts.

12
He shelters darkness itself in his caves
as if it were hiding there in terror of the sun.
Those who can hold their heads highest, approached for help,
will treat the low as well as the best like their very own.

13
With their tails from which human kings
make chowries, the yaks do him honour as truly
Raja of the Mountains while they fan him with elegant
gestures waving white as moonlight through the air.

14
If the Kinnara women should turn shy
when their clothes are taken off, they can run
and screen themselves with the swelling
clouds caught at the entrances to their caves.

15

Steadily the breeze comes down, carrying spray
from the descending Gangā, ruffling the cedar trees,
spreading open the tail feathers of peacocks,
and cooling mountain men after they hunt deer.

16

The Seven Great Rishis have taken lotuses in their hands
from pools on his heights and left the rest
growing there and flourishing, blossoming in the rays
of sunlight from below where the sun circles lower down.

17

The supreme Brahmā himself chose him for lordship
over the mountains and for a share in The Sacrifice,
seeing him as the origin of all the requisites
for The Sacrifice and with strength to sustain the earth.

18

Conscious of what should be done for the continuance
of his line,
he became Meru's relative, duly marrying Menā,
daughter born through mind alone to the Primeval Ancestors,
his equal and worthy of reverence even by the sages.

19

Then in time their lovemaking began, of a kind
at one with their beauty and power, till the wife
of that raja who sustains the earth became
pregnant while she was still lovely and young.

20

Her firstborn was a son, Maināka, destined
for marriage with a Nāga, for friendship with the ocean,
in whose waters he would painlessly escape even the lightning bolt
of Indra, infuriated, chopping off the wings of mountains.

21

And then she who had been Śiva's first wife,
driven by the insults of her father to suicide
in yogic concentration, the virtuous Satī entered
into the womb of The Mountain's wife for her next birth.

22

She who was to be so beautiful was generated in the pious
and intent Menā by the Master of the Mountains,
as when plans are carried out correctly, from a body
of free-flowing
politics, intense energy generates success.

23

The day of her birth brought happiness
to all beings who move on the earth or
live rooted in place. The wind was freed of dust. The air
was clear. Conches blew and the sky rained flowers.

24

The mother shone more brightly surrounded
by the shining splendour of the daughter, as the land
is radiant near the Vidūra hills when at the sound of new
thunder, its veins of jewels spring open.

25

Her rising begun, she put on day
by day ever more beautiful qualities
as the crescent moon will grow new surfaces
that were hidden inside its light.

26

Her loving family praised her with an ancestral name,
Pārvatī, Daughter of The Mountain, and only later she came
to the name Umā from her mother's words 'Ah, do not!'
when she with her lovely face chose the hardships of tapas.

27

The Mountain, though he had many children,
could never look at this child enough.
Even in spring, when the flowers are endless,
the mango blossom draws the circling, fervent bees.

28

Like a lamp by an intense flame,
like the sky by the Heavenly Gangā,
like a wise man whose speech is crystalline,
through her he was purified and adorned.

29

Often, with altars raised on the shore sands
of the Gangā, with a ball or with dolls made for her,
in her childhood she played among her friends
as if immersed in the sweet core of playing.

30

As the flights of geese in autumn come to the Gangā
and a glowing by night comes of itself to the great herbs,
so to her in whom nothing was ever forgotten, the knowledges
gained in an earlier life came of themselves at the right times.

31

She moved into an age past childhood
when her slim body, spontaneously adorned,
became a cause for drunkenness but not that of wine,
an arrow of the love god beyond his own flowered ones.

32

Like a painting unfolding under the brush
or a lotus spreading open at the sun's touch,
every part of her body had its perfect
symmetry in the fresh fullness of her youth.

33

When she walked, with the glitter of her lightly
arching great toes and nails, at the steps
of her feet, the earth seemed to pour up red,
a wealth of moving lotuses on land.

34

She could have learned her sloping walk,
with the movements all a play of grace,
from the imperial geese, who themselves were
eager to learn the rhythms of her anklets.

35

She had thighs so lovely, rounded and even,
and long but not too long, that it seemed her maker
must have summoned up a great effort of creation
to match the glow of them in the rest of her limbs.

36

Since the trunk of an elephant has too harsh a skin
and the plantain stalk is always cold,
those similes the world offers to express flowing,
ample curves were useless for those thighs.

37

And the splendour of her hips can be measured
by how Śiva at last would lift them
to his lap and there, faultless, she would rest
where even the desires of other women cannot go.

38

A delicate line of young hair crossing
the knot of her skirt and entering her deep
navel seemed a streak of dark light
from the blue gem centring her belt.

39

At her waist like an altar, curving and slender,
there were three gentle folds of the skin,
as if a woman in her youth could freshly grow
steps for the God of Love to climb.

40

She with her eyes like dark water lilies had full breasts
and they were of a light colour, with black nipples,
and pressed so closely together not even
the fibre of a lotus could find space between them.

41

Even softer than the soft śirīṣa flower
I must judge her arms, since the God of Love
whose banner is a fish, though he was destroyed
by Śiva, bound them around the neck of the god.

42

On her throat tapering up from the breasts,
she displayed a necklace strung of pearls
and the flesh brightened the jewels and the jewels
the flesh, mutually adorning their state.

43

The goddess Lakṣmī cannot find the richness
of the lotus in the moon, and drifting towards the lotus
she loses the moon's glory, but turning towards
the face of Umā she gained joy from both sources.

44

A flower set down on a young leaf
or a pearl lying on the finest coral,
only they can echo the dancing
of her white smile and her red lips.

45

Whenever she began to speak, the tones
would flow as sweet as amṛta in her voice
so that, on hearing her, even the song of the kokila
seemed harsh as a veena being played out of tune.

46

Like blue water lilies blowing in the wind
were her long eyes with their tremulous glances,
which either she had learned by imitation
of the does or they had learned from her.

47

Lightly moving and black as if painted in by pencil,
the long lines of her eyebrows drew desire,
and when he saw her, the God of Love lost
all his pride in the curved beauty of his bow.

48

If an animal can be shamed, then the yaks
surely would feel any delight they might have
in their tails withering before The Mountain's
daughter's masses of resplendent hair.

49

She was a collection of all things that are natural
similes for beauty, each one in its right place,
fashioned by the universal creator with his full energy,
as if eager to see all beauty in a single form.

50

Nārada who goes wherever he wants through the worlds,
when he saw her, they say, once beside her father,
proclaimed that she would become Śiva's single wife
through love, half the body and being of the god.

51

Though she was of age, her father then stood firm,
refusing to wish for another bridegroom,
just as oblation with mantras should be offered
not to any other shining substance but to fire.

52

Yet The Mountain could not give his daughter,
unasked for, to the god of gods. A wise man,
if he fears a refusal, will seem indifferent
even towards what he really desires.

53

Since this same woman with the bright teeth
had left her body, because of rage at her father
in an earlier life, from that day on, all attachment
broken, the Master of Living Beings had no wife.

54

Dressed in the elephant skin, his thoughts controlled,
he lived for tapas on some mountaintop in the range of snows,
where the rushing Gangā wets the cedar trees, the odour
of musk around him and the music of the Kinnaras.

55

With flowers of the nameru tree at their ears,
wearing clothes made of soft birchbark, smeared
with paint from red stones, Śiva's bands of followers
sat on rocks dusted with fragrant resin.

56

And his bull, pawing the masses of snow and rock,
terrifying the great Garhwal bulls who
could barely look at him, bellowed louder
than roaring lions, with a proud sweet sound.

57

There the god who can be known in eight forms
fed wood to the fire, itself a form of him,
and, for some unimaginable reason of his own, practised
tapas, he who himself gives the fruits of it.

58

With offerings for a guest, the Master of the Mountains
worshipped him who is beyond worth and revered by gods,
then ordered the woman who was restrained, she who was born
from his body, to go with two friends and honour the Lord.

59

Though she had become a danger to his concentration,
Śiva let her serve him as she wished. Only
those who are not disturbed when good cause
for a change is present have truly steadied minds.

60

She picked flowers for his offerings.

With care, she cleaned the altar.

She brought him kuśa grass and water
for his ritual needs.

Daily she was a servant to Śiva,

she with her beautiful hair,

and from the hair of the god, rays of moonlight
took her weariness away.

1
Then Pārvatī, seeing her hopes broken to pieces,
as Śiva burned Kāma down while she watched,
cursed her own beautiful body in her heart,
since beauty should carry a lover to success.

2
She wanted to make that loveliness bear fruit
through quiet effort in enduring acts of tapas,
and how else was she ever to win both
such a love and so high a husband?

3
When Menā learned that her daughter, whose mind
clung to Śiva, had resolved on tapas,
she hugged her to her breasts and spoke to warn her
against the great commitment to the silent life.

4
‘We have gods here at home who can please your heart.
What, my child, what has tapas to do with your body?
The soft śirīṣa flower can carry the weight
of a bee but will not bear the touch of a bird.’

5

Though she gave her daughter this advice, the wish was firm, and Menā could not change her determination. Who can oppose a mind unwavering in its pressure towards something desired, or water on its way to low ground?

6

Pārvatī had a close friend make the request to her father, who already understood the desire in her steady mind for the life of the forest till the ripe fruit should rise from endurance in tapas.

7

Her father, in his majesty, pleased at the vow he thought worthy of her, gave his permission and Gaurī went to a mountaintop full of peacocks. Later the people would call that place by her name.

8

Taking off the necklace that rubbed sandalwood from her skin with its swaying string of pearls, firm in her resolve, she put on clothing of bark, brown as early sunlight, held away from her body on the high breasts.

9

Her face was no less pleasing with her hair matted in knots than when arranged to perfection. Not only with its rows of clinging bees but even with moss growing on it, a lotus will glow.

10

For the vow she had taken, she wore a triple string,
new to her, of muñja grass, making her body hair bristle
over and over, and it turned the place red
where in earlier days her girdle string had rested.

11

No longer red from painting her lower lip with the lac
now faded, or from a ball coloured by the balm
on her breasts, but with fingers wounded gathering kuśa grass,
her hand became a lover of the holy rudrākṣa beads.

12

She who felt pain even from the flowers falling
out of her hair as she turned on her bed worth a fortune
lay now with the vine of her arm as a pillow
and when she sat up, used nothing but the bare ground.

13

Keeping her vow, she seemed to put two things in trust
in two places, till she would take them back again:
she left the glowing curves of her movement among
the slender vines and her flickering glances with the does.

14

Untiring, she herself nourished young forest plants
by watering them with pitchers round as her breasts;
and not even giving birth to the Young God would lessen
her maternal love for these firstborn children.

15

She won the deer over by giving them handfuls of wild grain and they trusted her so much that she could measure the length of their eyes against her own, out of curiosity, in the presence of her friends.

16

Sages came eager to see the young woman wearing her garment of bark, reciting mantras and making oblations to fire after her ritual bathing. Age has no weight when you are old in accomplishment.

17

Warring animals gave up their old hatred and the trees honoured guests with whatever fruit they wished for. Fires were installed in new huts of leaves and the tapas grove itself became a holy place.

18

When she thought the end she wanted could not be gained through such acts of tapas as she had already endured, then, paying no attention to how soft her body was, she began to practise the harshest forms of tapas.

19

She who had grown tired even playing with a ball threw herself into the practice of a forest hermit. Her body must have been made of golden lotuses, soft by nature and yet hard and resistant at the core.

20

Surrounding herself in summer with four blazing fires,
she accustomed her eyes to the dazzling splendour
of the sun and never looked away, her waist
beautifully slender and her smile glowing white.

21

And so her face, burned deeply by the rays of the sun,
took on the glow of a lotus that opens to light.
Only around the long outer corners of her eyes,
bit by bit, darkness appeared and made its way.

22

She broke her fast only with water that came down
of itself and with the rays of the moon,
which is full of divine drink. Her practice
was no different from the way of living of the trees.

23

Baked without pause by this range of fires,
the one that moves in the sky and those kindled around her,
then washed by the new rain at the end of the heat,
she along with the earth sent up steaming mist.

24

The first drops of rain rested on her eyelashes,
struck her lower lip, broke up on the heights of her breasts,
then slipping down over the three delicate folds
of her belly slowly reached her navel.

25

As she lay on stone, homeless in the months
of constant rain and rising bursts of wind,
the nights seemed to be watching her with open eyes
of lightning, like witnesses of the great tapas.

26

She passed the nights of the cold season standing
in water, as the winds were blowing sheets of sleet,
and she felt pity for a pair of cakravāka birds
somewhere near her, parted and crying out for each other.

27

With her face fragrant as a lotus in the night,
her lower lip a beautifully trembling petal, she gave
the brightness of a lotus back to the water as she stood
where a great wealth of lotuses had died in falling snow.

28

By refusing to eat even leaves dropping of themselves
from the trees, she went beyond the farthest limit of tapas,
and those who know the past have called that woman,
with her sweet voice, the Lady Who Refused the Leaves.

29

Wasting her body away with these vows
and more, day and night, she who was delicate
as the fibre of a lotus went far beyond
tapas practised by ascetics with hardened bodies.

30

Then a holy man with a staff and wearing black antelope skin
came into her tapas grove, speaking eloquently,
shining as if his splendour were part of the Vedas themselves,
like the years of young manhood shaped into flesh.

31

Rising, Pārvatī went to him and welcomed him,
first honouring him with reverent ceremony.
Those who have calmed their minds will treat exalted beings,
even though both are equals, with complete respect.

32

He accepted her fitting hospitable gestures
and seeming tired for the moment, he rested awhile.
Looking at Umā, with his eyes still and level,
he began to speak and his voice was calmly polite.

33

'Are the wood and kuśa grass for ceremonies within easy reach
and are there pools you can use for the required baths?
Do you practise tapas according to your strength,
since the body is known as the foremost ritual means?

34

'And are the young budding leaves still flourishing
on those bushes you have watered into growth,
trying with their red to rival the colour
of your lower lip, though its lac faded long ago?

35

'And are your feelings gentle towards the deer
who nibble grass out of your hands because they lo
seeming to copy your eyes with their tremulous gla
O woman whose eyes are like the lotuses!

36

'Pārvatī, men make no mistake when they say
no one is born with beauty to lead an evil life,
since in this world you, with your long eyes,
are a model of conduct even for ascetics.

37

'When water falls here from the Heavenly Gangā
carrying flowers white as laughter scattered
into the river by the Seven Rishis, it sanctifies
this Mountain and his clan less than your pure acts.

38

'Among the three aims of life, I can see by your condu
that Right Living is the essence, virtuous woman, sinc
you have seized hold of it and follow it alone,
Profit and Pleasure finding no room in your mind.

39

'You with your curving body should not consider me
only a stranger you have been especially kind to,
since the wise men say that among good people,
the passing of only seven words creates friendship.

40

'You who are wealthy with tapas! I as a Brahmin for whom inquisitiveness is natural have a question rising in my mind and, given your great tolerance, unless a secret must be kept, you should answer me.

41

'Born to the family of the Primeval Creator, with a form like the beauty made visible of all the three worlds, young and enjoying wealth come to you without effort, tell me what more could be the fruit of your tapas?

42

'Although a wilful woman might choose such a life because of something happening she did not want and could not bear my mind as it moves down paths of deliberate thought cannot conceive this being the case with you, slender woman

43

'This body of yours is not one that grief can overpower. Who could insult or attack you in your father's domain? Woman whose eyebrows are beautiful, what man ever would reach for the jewel flashing on a cobra's hood?

44

'Why have you, a young woman, thrown your ornaments away and put on the bark garment which is only right for the old? Tell me, is morning a concern for the night when at sundown the moon and the stars burst into sight?

45

'If it is heaven you wish for, your labour is useless.
The territories of your own father are divine ground.
Or if it is a husband, then tapas is not the way to him.
A jewel does not go seeking. No, it is searched out.

46

'Your sigh, as if a fire were burning inside you,
answers my question and yet I feel some deeper doubt.
To me it doesn't seem that a man you want could stay
away! How could it be hard for you to have anyone?

47

'What young man you desire could remain hardened against
the sight of you with your strands of hair, yellowed
like the ends of growing rice, dangling down
on your cheeks, the lotuses long fallen from your ears?

48

'The places where your ornaments were now burned by sun
and you so thin from your vows of the silent life,
become like a trace of the moon in the daylight sky, what man
of feeling who sees you could keep pain from his heart?

49

'I know the one you love must have his senses confused
through pride in his own beauty since still, for all this time,
he withholds his face, out of the reach of your eyes
that dance with the curving of their long lashes.

50

'Gaurī, how much longer will you go on suffering?
I too have heaped up tapas in my prime of life.
Using half its power, gain the husband you wish for.
I want to know, very much, who that husband could be.'

51

Though here the Brahmin had gone to the heart
of her secret, she was too shy to tell him about it
herself, but her eyes, bare of the black paint they
once wore, looked towards a friend standing beside her.

52

And then her friend said to the Brahmin, 'Holy man,
learn for what object, if you are curious,
she has made her body a ground for tapas as if someone
were to use a lotus for a shield against the sun.

53

'This lady, with contempt for great Indra and the other
lords of the four directions in their high places,
wishes Śiva himself for her husband, whom beauty
cannot capture, as he showed burning down the God of Love.

54

'But the arrow of that god with the flower bow, sent back
through the air by Śiva's invincible mantra, its point
never reaching Him Who Had Fought the Three Cities,
drove deep into her heart, though the god's body was ashes.

55

'From then on, filled with love, the curls of her hair
dusty grey from the sandal paste smeared on her forehead
to cool her, she could never find relief even
lying on the high mountain ice of her father's home.

56

'When she sang in the woods with the daughters of Kinnara rajas
and the acts of Śiva came to be mentioned in their songs,
she made them cry endless times by breaking
into tears and sobbing out half-swallowed words.

57

'On nights with only the morning left to them, when
she finally fell asleep for a moment, she would wake
suddenly crying out to the air, "Blue-Throated God,
where are you going?", reaching out for a throat not there.

58

'She drew his portrait with her own hands and in secret
scolded him in her beautiful, childlike way:
"Why don't you come to know this devotee of yours
when the wise say that you are wherever you wish to be?"

59

'And when she thought it through and saw that only
in one way could she win the Lord of the Universe,
then with her father's permission, with us attending her,
she began tapas in this forest where tapas is endured.

60

'Although our friend has seen the fruit hanging
on those trees she planted that have witnessed her tapas,
her wishes dwelling on Śiva who wears the moon in his hair
seem far away from even their time of sprouting.

61

'We her friends, in tears, have seen her grow thin with her tapas
and I cannot know when that god who is so desired,
so hard to win, will take pity on our friend, as Indra
does on the ploughed ground he has harmed by withholding
the rain.'

62

When the woman who knew the movements of Pārvatī's thought
had revealed her goal to the handsome young wanderer,
the Brahmin said to Umā, 'Is this true or is it a joke?'
and he showed no sign of pleasure in what he had heard.

63

The daughter of The Mountain, first rippling her crystal necklace
into her lifted hand with the fingers curling out like a bud,
only after great trouble, turning the words over
and over in her mind for a long time, said briefly:

64

'As you who excel in knowledge of the Vedas have heard,
so it is. Though I am only who I am, my aim is high.
This tapas was meant to raise me to that place.
There are no limits set for us in what we can imagine.'

65

'I know that great lord well,' the young Brahmin said,
'as he is. And you still keep on longing for him?
When I think of how he loves doing all that should be feared,
I cannot give the slightest approval to your desires.

66

'You are intent on winning something evil! How
can your hand at the knotting of the marriage thread
endure that first embrace from Śiva's hand
who wears the snakes for bracelets on his wrists?

67

'And look at yourself, take a moment to think
whether two things were ever a less fit couple
than your bridal silk embroidered with royal geese
and Śiva's elephant skin, still dripping blood.

68

'Could anyone, even an enemy, give his consent
that your feet, used to flowers spread through great halls,
should leave traces of their red paint in footprints
on the burning grounds scattered with the hair of the dead?

69

'Tell me what could be more bizarre than the chest
of the Three-Eyed God easily meeting with
your two breasts golden with sandal paste
and marking them with his dust from the funeral pyre?

70

'And one more humiliation—people of high rank
will smile from ear to ear as they see you,
worthy of being mounted upon a royal elephant,
riding after your marriage on Śiva's aged bull.

71

'Now there have come to be two things that must be pitied
because of their longing for union with Śiva:
the beautiful crescent of the moon he wears in his hair,
and you who are moonlight for the eyes of the world.

72

'A third eye deforms his body and no one knows his family.
His wealth is revealed by the fact that he wears the air.
Woman with eyes of a young deer, what slightest part even
of a husband's virtues can be found in that god?

73

'Change your mind. Give up wishing for your harm.
What a gulf between his kind and your pure form!
The good should honour a sacrificial post with Vedic rites,
not a stake set up for impaling men on the burning ground!

74

While the Brahmin was talking on and on against her grain,
she looked at him sideways, her eyes red at the edges,
her eyebrows tightened like curling vines and her anger
showing in the way her lower lip was trembling.

75

And she said to him, 'You must know nothing of Śiva as he most truly is, if you can say these things to me. The way of great beings has reasons that go beyond this world and the minds of fools who oppose them.

76

'Things that carry blessings in them are sought after by those intent on preventing disasters or on acquiring wealth. What use has the Shelter of the Universe, who is beyond desire, for such objects that attack the innermost life with hopes?

77

'Though he has nothing, he is the source of all riches. Master of the three worlds, his realm is the cemetery. His name means The Benevolent though he is terrifying. No one knows the Lord of the Sheltering Bow as he really is.

78

'Whether he is glowing with ornaments or wearing the snakes, dressed in the great elephant skin or robed in silk, with the skull in his hair or the moon for his crest, no one comprehends the form of the Body of the Universe.

79

'Once it has come to touch that body, I know dust from the very ashes of the dead will purify the living, and so the gods smear their foreheads with it as it falls from the play of his limbs in the language of his dancing.

80

'At the feet of that god who has no wealth and rides a bull,
Indra whose mount is the rutting elephant of the east
bows his royal crest down and paints those toes red
with pollen from the blossoms of the coral trees of heaven.

81

'You are worth nothing but one thing you did say well
about the Lord, though you only meant to insult him.
They call him the source of Brahmā Who Exists without Birth.
Where would anyone find any signs of his beginning?

82

'Enough arguing. Let him even be the kind that you say
he is, exactly that and nothing else beyond.
My heart is full and sweet with love for him.
Someone who knows her own will can ignore insults.

83

'My friend, keep this boy from saying whatever else
he seems to intend since his lower lip is quivering.
Not only speaking against the great but even listening
to words that oppose them makes one share in an evil act.

84

'Or better, I will go away myself,' she was saying,
her garment of bark slipping down her breasts as she turned
to move,
when taking on his own form, the God Whose Banner
Carries a Bull, smiling, swept her up in his arms.

85

When she saw him she trembled and, her body turning moist,
she froze with her foot in the air not descending for the step.
Like a river that meets a mountain blocking the path of its flow,
the daughter of the Raja of Mountains neither stayed nor
went away.

86

Śiva who wears the moon in his hair said, 'From this moment,
I am your slave, gained by tapas, woman of healing beauty,' and
all the weariness of her effort left her in that instant
for out of exhaustion, once desire is satisfied, a new strength
rises.

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